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# BENGALI LITERATURE

BY  
J. C. GHOSH

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## PREFACE

A HISTORY of Bengali literature to the end of the nineteenth century is offered in the following pages. The twentieth century is outside my scope, but I have included an essay on Rabindranath Tagore in view of his importance.

In dealing with the literature I have paid special attention to the religious movements, and the political and social forces, to which it was related.

The unacknowledged translations are my own, and I have made them as literal as possible.

My book was written under the auspices of the Rhodes Trust, and I owe a debt of gratitude to the Rhodes Trustees, and to their secretary Lord Elton, for the help and encouragement they gave me.

Parts of Chapter IV embody some of the results of an investigation that I undertook for a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, and I take the present opportunity of publicly thanking the Leverhulme Trustees.

My old teacher Edward Thompson was keenly interested in my writing this book, and I am very unhappy to think that he is not alive to see it.

Among my friends who helped me I should specially mention Paul Goldberg for the loving care with which he read the manuscript and for the many suggestions that he made. The book would have been much poorer without his help. Sisir Kumar Mukerjea helped me with some of the translations.

The staff of the India Office Library gave me many facilities for writing the book, and the staff of the Clarendon Press were helpful in many matters connected with the printing.

The book is dedicated to the memory of my mother.

J. C. G.

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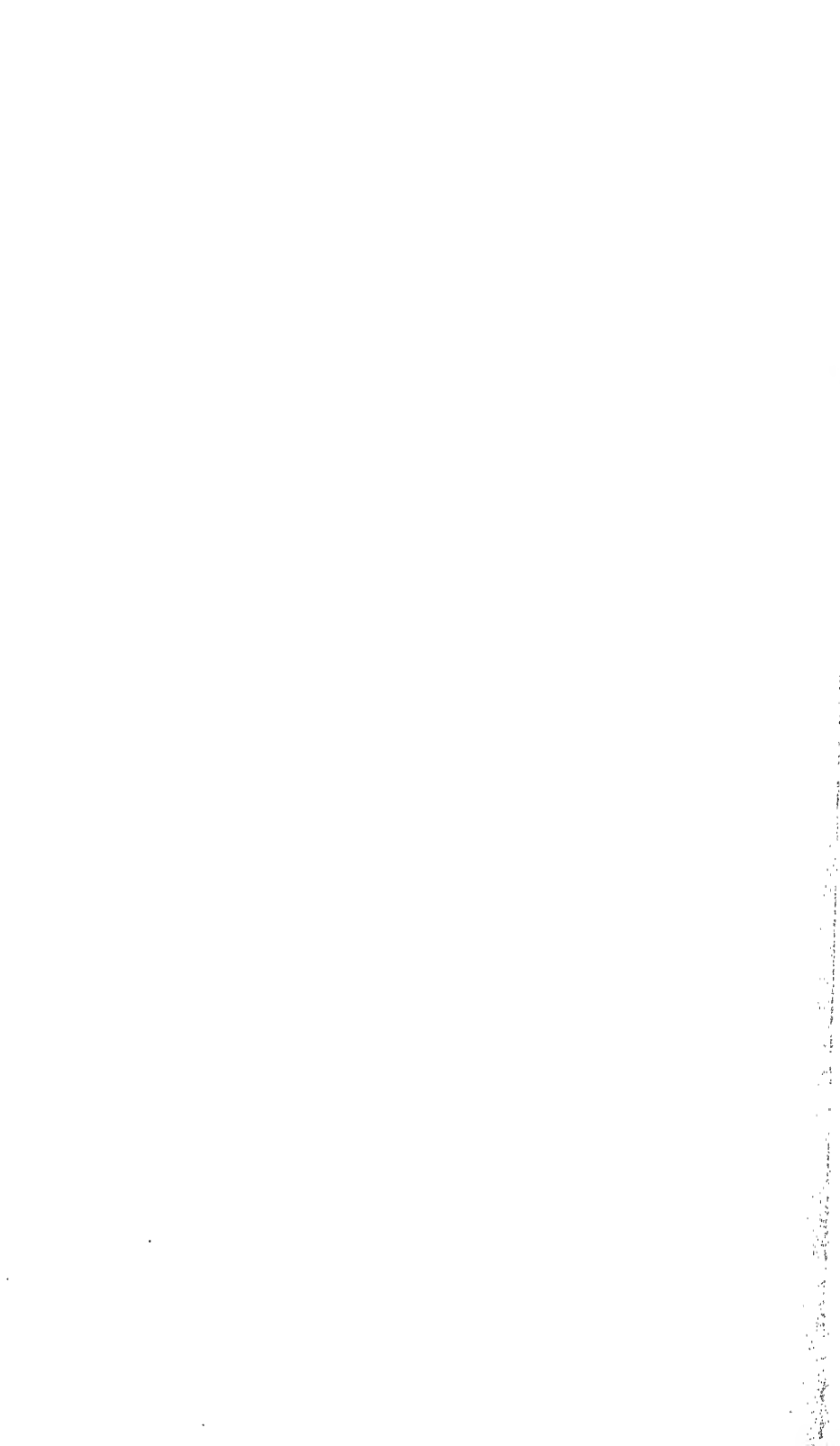
## NOTE

**I**N transliterating Bengali words the generally accepted symbols have been used, with the following modifications. The inherent vowel *a* has been dropped except where it is sounded in Bengali. All the three sibilants, palatal, cerebral, and dental, have been indiscriminately represented by *s* for the reason that they are pronounced alike in Bengali. For the same reason no distinction has been made between the cerebral and the dental nasals, the short and the long *i*, and the short and the long *u*. Double *v* and double *y* have been shortened to single *v* and single *y*, and compound words have sometimes been split up with hyphens.

The Indian custom of referring to authors by their first names instead of their surnames has been generally followed. But on pp. 169-88 Rabindranath Tagore has been referred to by his surname because he is widely known outside India by that name.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

THE Bengali people appear, from their physical and linguistic traits, to be a mixture of the four races known to ethnologists as Kol, Dravidian, Mongolian, and Aryan.<sup>1</sup> The Kols are the Neolithic people who are now supposed to have lived over the whole of central India and the Gangetic plains as far as the base of the Himalayas, and to have been the same as, or closely akin to, the Mons and Khmers of Burma and Indo-China. In Bengal, as elsewhere, they evolved no civilization, and their language, a member of the Austro-Asiatic family, has been almost totally absorbed in the language of the Dravidian and the later races who have conquered and superseded them. The Dravidian and the Mongolian (or Tibeto-Chinese) languages in their turn have been absorbed in Bengali, the Aryan language. The non-Aryan languages evolved no literature or script, and they have now shrunk into minor dialects spoken by aboriginal and backward tribes in hill and forest regions. The Kol-Dravidian dialects are now almost entirely confined to such tribes as the Santhal, Munda, and Kurukh of the Chota Nagpur area. Western, particularly south-western, Bengal seems always to have been predominantly Dravidian in population, and to have had from ancient times an unbroken racial and linguistic affinity with Orissa, Andhra, and other Dravidian countries farther to the south. The Mongolian dialects are now confined to such tribes as the Bodo and Kuki-Chin of the northern and eastern frontiers. The broad difference between the pronunciation of western and eastern Bengal is due to predominating Dravidian influence in the west, and to predominating Mongolian influence in the east.

Bengali is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, and it represents, along with Assamese, the easternmost branch of that family. In India the ancient Aryan language gave rise to several Prākṛits or spoken dialects and to the literary language Sanskrit. The Bhāṣās, or modern Aryan languages such as Bengali, originated from the Prākṛits, though they have always been influ-

<sup>1</sup> I have used these terms in their conventional sense, and with the awareness that in India as elsewhere they have little scientific significance beyond the convenient description of some broadly defined linguistic and ethnic traits.

enced by Sanskrit. The Prākritis, so to speak, are their mothers, and Sanskrit is their father. The Prākritis had their distinguishing regional characteristics, and were subject to the changes of time, the latest stage in their evolution before they gave birth to the Bhāsās being known as Apabhraṃsa; while Sanskrit, practically fixed about the fifth century B.C., was the sacred and cultural language for Āryāvartta,<sup>1</sup> and later for all India. Neither the Prākritis nor Sanskrit, however, were pure Aryan, but had assimilated many words, and many phonetic, morphological, and syntactical characteristics, from the non-Aryan languages of India. They transmitted these non-Aryan words and characteristics to the Bhāsās which originated from them, and which in their turn assimilated further words and characteristics directly from the non-Aryan languages. Thus the non-Aryan elements in Bengali are due to both direct and indirect non-Aryan influence; the latter through Sanskrit and the Prākrit from which Bengali is descended.

The *prāchya* or eastern branch of the Aryan language in India gave rise to Māgadhi Prākrit, the parent of the modern languages Bihari, Oriya, Assamese, and Bengali.<sup>2</sup> Māgadhi Prākrit is known to have developed about the third or the fourth century A.D., but the date when Bengali developed from it cannot be definitely ascertained. Lack of material has made it impossible to construct a proper history of the birth and early growth of the Bengali language. Only two of the extant Bengali manuscripts<sup>3</sup> are believed to be older than the sixteenth century; the rest belong to the sixteenth, and more commonly to the seventeenth and eighteenth, centuries. The Aryan language which the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tshang found spoken in Bengal in the seventh century was probably the Apabhraṃsa of Māgadhi Prākrit representing the transitional stage before the final emergence of Bengali. The final emergence probably took place in the tenth century, under the stimulus which all aspects of culture received during the reign of the Pāl kings.

<sup>1</sup> 'Land of the Aryans'; ancient name by which northern and central India were called.

<sup>2</sup> The main characteristics of Māgadhi Prākrit—e.g. the interchange or abolition of case-endings; the tendency to corrupt *r* into *l*; the substitution of the palatal *s* for the dental and the cerebral *s*; the substitution of the dental *n* for the cerebral *ṇ*, of the palatal *j* for the semi-vowel *y*, and of the labial *b* for the semi-vowel *v*—are fully retained in Bengali.

<sup>3</sup> The manuscripts of *Charyā* and *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kirtan*.

There was some influence of Sauraseni Apabhraṃsa on Old Bengali. Sauraseni is a western Indian language, and it spread in eastern India under the influence of the Rajput kings of central India who from the ninth to the twelfth century were the paramount power in Āryāvartta. It was the language of the royal courts, and was widely cultivated by the professional bards of these Rajput kings and, on their model, by the professional bards of the other kings of Āryāvartta. That is why a great deal of the early literature of Bengal is in a mixed Sauraseni-Bengali dialect.

As is to be expected, there was a preponderance of Prākṛit words in Old Bengali. These words, called *tadbhava* in Indian philology, form the bulk of the vocabulary of Bengali, as of all other Bhāsās or modern Aryan languages of India. In addition Bengali contained from its birth a large number of Sanskrit words. These, called *tatsama*, were copiously reinforced by later borrowings from Sanskrit, particularly during the classical revivals that took place between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The rise of Bengali prose in the nineteenth century brought about a further influx of *tatsama* words. New words were needed to express the Western ideas that came with British rule, and those words were mostly derived from Sanskrit.

The name *desi* (native) is given in Indian philology to the words of Kolarian, Dravidian, and Mongolian origin which have been incorporated into Sanskrit, the Prākṛits, and the Bhāsās. Bengali has a large number of *desi* words,<sup>1</sup> borrowed directly from the non-Aryan languages, and indirectly through Sanskrit and Māgadhi Prākṛit. Similar non-Aryan influence, direct and indirect, is seen in its phonetics, grammar, and syntax. Cerebral sounds were not present in the ancient Aryan languages, and their presence in Sanskrit, Māgadhi Prākṛit, and Bengali is due to Dravidian influence. The same is true of such morphological characteristics as the use of post-positions instead of prepositions. The syntax of Sanskrit and Bengali, in fact of all the Aryan languages of India, is Dravidian rather than Aryan. The extensive use of onomatopœic words in Bengali represents a Kol-Dravidian characteristic, and Dravidian influence is particularly strong in Bengali place-names and suffixes.<sup>2</sup> The Bengali people, particularly of the east, betray a Mongolian

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *kailā*, *ṭhākur*, *guṛā* (Kol); *kālā*, *kānā*, *kaṭu*, *amu* (Dravidian); *ṭhūk*, *borā*, *phirā* (Mongolian).

<sup>2</sup> e.g. *-rā* and *-guṛi* in *Baguṛā* and *Siliguṛi*.



characteristic in not giving full value to cerebral and palatal sounds in their pronunciation. East Bengal, under Mongolian influence, has the tendency to add aspiration to unaspirated sounds, and to drop nasalization. West Bengal, under Dravidian influence, has the opposite tendency to drop aspiration, and to add nasalization.

The Muhammadan conquest of Bengal (c. A.D. 1200) introduced many Persian, Arabic, and Turkish words, chiefly relating to administration. The Arabic and Turkish words mostly came through Persian. There was a further influx of Persian words after 1576, when Akbar's conquest of Bengal made it a part of the Mogul empire. Many Persian words have dropped out of use, however, since the substitution of English as the official language. There are about three thousand Persian words<sup>1</sup> in present-day Bengali, which has also inherited a small number of ancient Iranian words<sup>2</sup> as part of its Aryan legacy. The assimilation of English words,<sup>3</sup> which began in the days of the East India Company, is still going on, though not so copiously as before. The present tendency, an offshoot of nationalism and an indication of the growing strength of Bengali, is to invent an equivalent, generally with the help of Sanskrit. The Portuguese, the Dutch, and the French who came to India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contributed a few words to the Bengali vocabulary.<sup>4</sup> The only other European language to which Bengali is indebted is ancient Greek;<sup>5</sup> it has borrowed a small number of words from Greek through Sanskrit. Persian has contributed a little over three per cent. of the Bengali vocabulary, and English and other European languages have contributed a little over one per cent.<sup>6</sup>

The English word Bengal is a corruption of Bāṅgālā (often contracted to Bāṅglā). Bāṅgālā (or Bāṅglā) and Baṅga (or Vaṅga, properly to transliterate its Sanskrit version) have been the country's names ever since the days of Muslim rule; though Vaṅga originally denoted east Bengal, particularly the modern Dacca and Faridpur districts. In addition to Vaṅga there were the three other original

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *jami* (land), *āynā* (mirror), *dārogā* (police officer).

<sup>2</sup> e.g. *pāik* (footman, foot-soldier), *pūthi* (book).

<sup>3</sup> e.g. *āfis* (office), *gelās* (glass), *ṭebīl* (table).

<sup>4</sup> e.g. *kāṭān* (sword), *khānā* (ditch), *jānālā* (window) from Portuguese; *trup*, *turup* (trump) from Dutch *troef*; *kārtuj* and *kupan* from Fr. *cartouche* and *coupon*.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. *surāṅga* (tunnel) from Gk. *surinks*, *syrinx*.

<sup>6</sup> For a full study of the subject see Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*.

divisions named Pundra (north-central Bengal), Rāṛh (west Bengal), and Suhma (south-west Bengal). Pundra and Rāṛh came jointly to be known as Gauṛ, originally the name of the country round about the modern Burdwan and Murshidabad districts and with its chief town at Karnasuvarna. It was at Gauṛ in the seventh or eighth century A.C. that the semi-historical Ādisur is said to have founded the first independent kingdom Bengal ever had. In later history Gauṛ became the centre of Bengal's political and cultural life and one of the most prosperous and important states of India. Such was its prominence that for a long time in the past Bengal was called Gauṛ or Gauṛ-Vaṅga.

Aryan civilization came to Bengal from the north-west, and as an overflow from the neighbouring land of Bihar. Culturally and politically Bihar and Bengal have always been very close, and they formed one province until 1912. Bihar was the birthplace and the metropolitan centre of the great religious orders of Jainism and Buddhism, and it contained the three ancient states of Aṅga, Videha, and Magadha. Videha had the famous school of Sanskrit learning in Mithilā, and the culture of Mithilā had a great influence in Bengal. The political history of India properly begins with the rise of Magadha, and the glory of the Magadha empire under the Mauryas and the Guptas has few rivals in the ancient world. The sixth century B.C. is the date when the aryanization of Bihar is usually supposed to have been accomplished and that of Bengal to have begun. The new civilization was mainly brought by Jain and Buddhist monks, but it cannot be said to have spread widely until Bengal became a part of Asoka's empire in the third century B.C. Fa Hien<sup>1</sup> found Aryan civilization in Bengal in the fifth century A.C., and so did Hiuen Tshang<sup>1</sup> in the seventh century.

Bengal was known to the Aryans in the Vedic age, and there are references to it in such early Sanskrit literature as the *Mahābhārata*, *Aitāreya Āraṇyaka*, *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, and Pāṇini's grammar. But her history does not properly begin until the rise of the Pāl kings towards the end of the eighth century A.C. The reign of the Pāl kings lasted over three hundred years, and it is justly noted for its cultural achievements. Bengali language and literature are generally supposed to have been born in the Pāl period, and the stone and cast-metal sculpture of that period is well known. Bengal had already developed a school of Sanskrit poetry, and the Gaurīya

<sup>1</sup> Chinese travellers who left accounts of their travels in India.

Riti or Bengali mode of poetic composition had gained recognition in Sanskrit poetics by the seventh century A.C. But there is no definite evidence of any Sanskrit poems by Bengali writers before the Pāl period. Avinanda, the court poet of Dev Pāl, wrote a Sanskrit poem entitled *Rāma-charita*, and another Sanskrit poem of the same name was written by Sandhyākar Nandi during the reign of Rām Pāl.

Under the Sen kings Bengal further developed her national character. She was no longer under the political and cultural influence of Magadha as she always had been from early times. A further break with Magadha occurred with the destruction of Magadhan culture during the Muslim conquest. Mithilā was the only place in Bihar which managed to salvage some of its cultural life out of the devastation of the conquest, and so to retain its influence on Bengal. Bengali scholars continued for a long time to go there for Sanskrit studies, and the poetry of Mithilā influenced the poetry of Bengal. The Vaisnava religion was firmly planted under the Sen kings, and the social structure of the upper classes was stabilized, in fact stereotyped, by the introduction of the *kulin* or pure-caste system by Ballāl Sen. Jaya Deva, a court poet of Laksman Sen, wrote the *Gita Govinda*, the best contribution to Sanskrit poetry by a Bengali. Laksman Sen was the last independent Hindu king of Bengal, and he lost his throne to the Muslim conquerors in c. A.D. 1200. The conquerors, commonly known as Pathans, utterly ravaged the country and disrupted its cultural life. Academies were dissolved, temples and monasteries were desecrated, libraries destroyed, and priests and scholars were persecuted. Sanskrit never recovered from the blow, while Bengali literature, and Bengali culture generally, had to wait until the fifteenth century before making a reappearance.

One of the things for which Bengal was famous in ancient times was her sea and river craft. Her art of navigation, boat-building, and maritime warfare developed out of her long sea-coast and many rivers. She had a large sea-borne trade, mostly carried on through the ancient seaport of Tāmralipta. River and sea-voyages are a notable feature of Bengali folk-lore and literature, particularly of the Manasā and Chandi poems to be noticed later.

Although Bengal adopted Aryan civilization and culture, she never became a stronghold of Brahmanic orthodoxy. One might even go so far as to say that in ancient times Brahmanic orthodoxy

received an effective check in the eastern countries of Bihar and Bengal. That is probably the reason why those countries were regarded by the orthodox Aryans of the Punjab and the United Provinces as being outside the Aryan fold. There is the legend of Māthava in *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* according to which the sacred flame started eastwards from the banks of the Saraswati in the Punjab, came as far as the Sadānirā (Gaṇḍaki?) in the United Provinces, but did not come to Bihar and Bengal. According to the *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* it was necessary for those Aryans of the west to perform expiatory sacrifices if they visited Bihar and Bengal. Bihar, as we have already said, was the birthplace and metropolitan centre of Jainism and Buddhism, and those are the religions which were the most widespread in ancient Bengal. Jainism remained more or less confined to west Bengal, but Buddhism spread over the whole country. Those religions, called *tairthikiya* or heretical, did not observe the caste system, and were opposed in other ways to Brahmanic orthodoxy. They represented the spirit of self-assertion of the non-Aryan masses at the bottom of Hindu society, and the bulk of their followers, particularly in the early days of their propagation, came from the same masses. Equally democratic and catholic was the spirit of Vaisnavism and of the medieval cults (e.g. the Manasā, Chandi, Dharma, and Nāth cults) which were prevalent in Bengal after the decline of Buddhism. They too were opposed to Brahmanic orthodoxy and drew the bulk of their recruits from the lower classes. The immigration of Brahmans into Bengal had continued, however, since the coming of Aryan civilization. Hindu kings of later times are known to have imported Brahmans from central and western India, and to have settled them with grants of land and stipend, with the object of raising the cultural level of their country. The Brahmanic influence has always been strong, but it has also been tempered by Bengal's dislike of orthodoxy. The catholic spirit of Bengal further expressed itself in the attempts that were made during Muslim rule to bring about a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. Vaisnavism and the medieval cults mentioned above welcomed Hindus and Muslims alike, but they centred on the worship of particular deities, and were denominational and sectarian to that extent. So arose a wider synthesis based on the deep human principle that all religions and their prophets are different manifestations of the same divine spirit. As is well known, that is the essential principle of

Hinduism, and it was reasserted as the basis of a synthesis for unifying the Hindu and Muslim masses. At all times Bengal has been noted for her liberality of outlook and for her sensitiveness to new ideas. A recent example of this is the immediate and whole-hearted response she gave to Western civilization in the nineteenth century. She has always championed freedom in matters of thought and spirit, and has always accorded a warm welcome to new movements. Her faults have sprung from too much rather than too little freedom, from laxity rather than rigidity.

Several of the Jain *tirthaṅkaras* (chief saints) were born in Bengal, and most of them worked there. Bengal is the birthplace of the great Vaisnava saint Chaitanya, and her contribution to Vaisnavism is among the greatest in India. The medieval cults of Sahajiyā, Nāthism, and Tantrism owe much to Bengal. Lui, one of the earliest leaders, and probably a founder, of Sahajiyā, was a Bengali. Minanāth, Goraksanāth, and Hāripā, the main leaders of the Nāth cult, are sometimes supposed to have come from Bengal. Bengal was one of the principal centres of Tantrism, and produced many able preachers and exponents of Mahāyāna and Tāntric Buddhism. The greatest of these were Silābhadra and Dipaṅkar Srijñān. The first, the son of the king of Samatāṭa (east Bengal), was the head of the great monastery of Nālandā in Bihar, and the teacher of Hiuen Tshang. Dipaṅkar (called Atisā in Tibet) was the son of the king of Vikramanipur, and the chief priest of the monastery of Vikramasilā. His greatest work was the reform of Buddhism in Tibet.

The first phase of Bengali culture appropriately takes its name from Gauṛ. Originally situated in the north-west at the corner of Pundra and Rāṛh, and drawing sustenance from the civilization of both of them, Gauṛ was also the main gate through which the culture of Bihar, and thus of Āryāvartta, came to Bengal. Aryan civilization had travelled from the west to the east, and from the north to the south, before coming to Bengal; and it travelled in the same directions after coming there. It had followed the course of the Ganges in coming from the Punjab to Bihar, and it followed the same river in coming from Bihar to Gauṛ. The north-western part of Bengal was thus linked to Āryāvartta by the Ganges, but not the western and the south-western parts, most of which were shut off from Āryāvartta by their hills and forests and continued for a long time in their original Kol-Dravidian ways. Even now

the western and south-western parts have a large aboriginal and semi-aboriginal population. The Ganges not only linked Gauṛ with Bihar and the great Āryāvartta beyond, but, flowing farther to the east and the south, linked it with east and south Bengal. In addition there was the Bhāgirathi (Hooghly) which split away from the Ganges in the Gauṛ region, and linked it with western Bengal and the delta, the last the youngest and the most fertile land in the country. Aided by its natural situation Gauṛ became the paramount political state in Bengal, and the only state there whose power and culture ranked among the highest in India. The culture it evolved was sufficiently large and long-lived to be described as national. The Muslim conquest made no difference to the political status which Gauṛ had achieved under the Pāl and the Sen kings, and it continued as the capital of Bengal, and as the principal seat of political power in eastern India, until the end of Pathan rule. But there was a great difference in the cultural sphere. The Muslim conquest dealt a deadly blow to Hindu culture, and the conquerors had next to nothing to offer in its place. India has rarely known rulers so utterly barbarous as the Pathans, or experienced such distress as she did under them. Muslim culture in India did not properly begin until the days of Mogul rule, and Bengal did not become a part of the Mogul empire until 1576. Even then Bengal was too far away from Delhi, the imperial capital, to receive the full stream of Muslim culture. There was incessant warfare for 250 years after the Muslim conquest, and the average life of a Pathan ruler on the throne of Gauṛ was not even ten years. The condition of the country somewhat improved, and Bengali literature reappeared, in the second half of the fourteenth century. But Gauṛ never recovered its former glory, and the Gauṛ phase of Bengali culture may be said to have ended with the fifteenth century.

Nadiyā (or Navadwip), Gauṛ's successor, had already come into prominence. It had enjoyed royal favour under Laksman Sen, who had made it his second capital. Since the coming of Aryan civilization into north-west Bengal Brahman families were continually emigrating from there to the east and the south. Along with the Jain and Buddhist missionaries these Brahman immigrants were the principal bearers of Aryan civilization, and their numbers swelled as Gauṛ and north-west Bengal came under Muslim sway. Nadiyā was the greatest of these Brahman colonies, and it stood on the Bhāgirathi about half-way down into the delta. While north

and west Bengal were being ravaged by almost incessant warfare from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, and the torch of culture was dimming in Gauṛ, Nadiyā kept it alight in the comparative quiet and security of the south. It was the principal centre of Vaisnavism in Bengal, and the principal scene of Chaitanya's life and work. It became famous in India for its Navya Nyāya or new logic, and developed a great school, the greatest in Bengal, of classical learning, philosophy, and vernacular poetry. The school of logic and metaphysics was founded by Vāsudev Sarvabhaum and perfected by Raghunāth Siromani.<sup>1</sup> Raghunandan Bhaṭṭāchārya, the great authority on jurisprudence, also belonged to Nadiyā. 'People come from various parts to Navadwip to acquire learning. It has countless students and teachers': so said Vrindāvan Dās in his *Chaitanya-bhāgavat*<sup>2</sup> about Nadiyā of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. According to Narahari Chakravartti in *Bhakti-ratnākara*<sup>3</sup> Nadiyā was about sixteen square miles in area, and consisted of one town and several villages. Its learning overflowed to other places on the Bhāgirathi such as Sāntipur and Bhāṭpārā, and it was the pivot of the Hindu renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Aided by generous patrons such as Maharaja Krisnachandra, the Nadiyā phase of Bengali culture continued from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

One reason why the cultural leadership of Bengal had shifted southwards to Nadiyā was the economic wealth of the delta. That is also the reason why, having come to the delta, it has stayed there. It travelled a few hundred miles farther to the south, and by the same river, to Calcutta, where the third, and so far the last, phase of Bengali culture began with the nineteenth century. Calcutta's rise from an obscure village to the foremost town in India was entirely due to British influence, and its cultural leadership of Bengal, and in some respects of all India, was due to its position as the imperial capital of British India. Vaisnavism was no doubt a great progressive force in its hey-day, but the culture of Nadiyā, however good in many ways, was in the main the conservative, even reactionary, culture of neo-Hinduism, and had already reached a dead end in the eighteenth century. Vaisnavism too had by then lost its original purity and dynamic power. The Nadiyā culture, therefore, could no longer meet the needs of the modern Hindu,

<sup>1</sup> Author of *Chintāmani Didhiti*.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 54.

let alone the other communities; whereas the young scientific civilization of Europe that came with British rule satisfied the vital urge for modernity in all. That is why it was eagerly welcomed. The great renaissance it brought about was in many respects similar to the European renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Following the cultural phases mentioned above, Bengali literature will be divided in the present work into the three periods of predominating Gauṛ, Nadiyā, and Calcutta influence. The first, roughly extending from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, is the period of early growth when the language and literature are in a primitive condition. In the first half of the period the language is heavily Prākritic; and the literature is communal, as of a primitive rustic society, and mystical-religious. There is only verse, and verse that is meant to be sung. In the second half, i.e. in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the language fully assumes its Bengali character, and a Sādhū-bhāṣā, or literary language, is created with *tatsama* words borrowed from Sanskrit. The Sanskrit influence, a symptom of the reassertion of Hinduism, brings about a classical revival which to some extent humanizes the literature without, however, altering its fundamental communal and religious character. Literature is scanty in the first half, is fairly copious in the second.

In the middle or Nadiyā period, extending from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the modernizing process already begun in the previous period continues farther. The language discards the few archaic forms which were still clinging to it, the classical revival is in full swing, and the Sādhū-bhāṣā establishes itself as the standard literary language in all parts of the country. A large volume of literature is produced, and the national legends, such as those of Chāḍ Sadāgar, Bipulā, Dhanapati, Kāḷketu, Lāusen, and Govindachandra and his mother Maynāmati, assume final form. The secularizing and humanizing process proceeds, particularly under Vaisnava influence, but the communal character of the literature persists and its religious obsession dies hard.

The modern or Calcutta period, which, through the introduction of English education, is also the period of Western influence, begins in A.D. 1800. Printing is introduced,<sup>1</sup> and prose is born. Journalism, fiction, and the modern drama and theatre are also

<sup>1</sup> That is, on a large scale. A few Bengali books were printed before 1800.



born. What is most important, literature becomes secular, and as such, for the first time fully deserves its name. This does not mean that the religious obsession does not persist—it does that even to-day—but it no longer dominates. Poetry is no longer meant to be sung or chanted, but to be read and recited. English is the main modernizing and vitalizing influence, and the form and content of Bengali literature are enriched with modes, ideas, and themes borrowed from English. The classicized Sādhū-bhāṣā is perceived in the second half of the century to be artificial and unsuitable; and is replaced by Chalit-bhāṣā, or common language, mainly based on the colloquial speech of Calcutta. The decline of Indian feudalism transfers wealth and power from the old aristocracy to the new *bourgeoisie*, and literature and culture acquire a *bourgeois* character to suit the needs of their new patron. The principal change is the English or Western influence, brought about by the fact that the new-risen middle class is the most anglicized section of the population. The primitive communism of pre-British times gives way to the monopoly capitalism introduced by the British, and economic wealth and political power are now concentrated away from the village in the town. The rustic character of the literature is simultaneously replaced by the urban. In short, the literature discards its primitive, rustic, communal, and religion-ridden character to become modern, urban, secular, human, and individual. The writer's personality is no longer suppressed as in the previous periods, and his range and scope are now greater. The nineteenth century finds the literature a small stream and leaves it a big river, and its increased vitality is seen in its output, which exceeds the output of the two previous periods taken together. The afore-mentioned changes take place earlier, and in a greater measure, in Bengali than in the other Indian literatures, and they raise Bengali to the position of the premier modern Indian literature.

Bengali was both fortunate and unfortunate in having such a great language and literature as Sanskrit for its father. The influence of Sanskrit on it was similar to the influence of Latin on English, but much greater, because Sanskrit was not a foreign tongue and was alive at the time when Bengali was born. Sanskrit ceased to be a living language after the Muhammadan conquest, but its influence remained, and it was that influence, operating through the classical renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that put Bengali on its feet. The influence continued in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the help of Sanskrit was again sought for the formation of Bengali prose in the first half of the nineteenth century. Bengali is indebted to Sanskrit for its grammar, rhetoric, and prosody, and for much of its vocabulary and phonetics. Almost all the literary modes, ideas, and figures, and many of the themes, on which Bengali subsisted until the nineteenth century were also derived from Sanskrit. Above all, Sanskrit provided Bengali with a great spiritual and intellectual background, with the rich heritage, in short, of India's ancient civilization. But the greatness of Sanskrit was also a hindrance to Bengali, in so far as Bengali had to grow up in rivalry with it. Up to the nineteenth century, and to a lesser degree even after, Sanskrit always reigned supreme as the medium of India's religious and secular culture, and as the repository of her ancient knowledge and history. It monopolized the high offices of the Church and the State, it was zealously cultivated by priests, philosophers, and poets, and was generously patronized by the royalty and aristocracy. It was the embodiment of the great Indian tradition, and was universally respected as the *deva-bhāsā* or the language of the gods. The Jains and the Buddhists at first wrote in Prākṛit as the more suitable language for spreading their doctrines among the masses, but they soon reverted to tradition by writing in Sanskrit. The prestige of Sanskrit was greater than ever after Kālidāsa and the other writers of the classical period had enriched it with their genius. Then there was a decline, but Sanskrit was still the cultural language when Bengali was born in the days of the Pāl and Sen kings. Poets of genius such as Jaya Deva, and aspirants after fame, influence, and favour, would still write in Sanskrit, not in Bengali. They did so not only because Sanskrit was the better language, but for the natural desire they had to belong to the great tradition Sanskrit embodied. The reason that made Sir Thomas More in England write his *Utopia* in Latin in preference to English has its parallel in Bengal, where Raghunāth Siromani wrote his *Chintāmani Didhiti* in Sanskrit in preference to Bengali. That was in the sixteenth century, and Bengali had fairly established itself by then. With the same object as the Jains and Buddhists had before them, the Vaisnavas wrote most of their literature in Bengali, but many of their sacred books<sup>1</sup> were none the less written in Sanskrit.

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *Bhaktirasāmṛitasindhu* and *Ujjwalanilamani* by Rup Goswāmi; and the lives of Chaitanya by Murāri Gupta and Paramānanda Sen Kavikarnapur.

Instances may also be found in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of authors adopting an apologetic attitude for having written in Bengali. Vijay Gupta,<sup>1</sup> for instance, speaks of the 'natural faultiness of Bengali poetry',<sup>2</sup> and Kavindra (Parameswar)<sup>3</sup> considers Bengali poetry unsuitable for philosophical discussion.<sup>4</sup> For a young and undeveloped modern vernacular literature to have to grow up against the established privileges of a highly developed and ancient classical literature would have been difficult in any case; and Bengali had to contend with the special difficulties arising from the religious veneration in which a large body of Sanskrit literature was held. To translate the Sanskrit Purāṇas into Bengali was an act of sacrilege in the eyes of the conservative Brahman priest and pandit. 'Whoever hears the eighteen purāṇas and the *Rāmāyana* in Bengali goes to Rourava hell': so ran an unofficial ban. Even in the nineteenth century, when Bengali had fully established itself, it was necessary for Rāmmohan Rāy<sup>5</sup> to carry on a long controversy with the priest and pandit regarding the propriety of translating the sacred books of Hinduism into the vernacular tongue.

While Sanskrit was the vehicle of orthodox Brahmanism, Bengali literature owed its origin and early growth to the medieval cults—such as the Sahajiyā, Nāth, Manasā, Chandi, and Dharma cults—which we have mentioned above. These cults originated before the Muslim conquest, but they became most active, and they fully established themselves in Hindu society, after the conquest. They were the main power behind the resurgence of Hinduism in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, and they provided the subject-matter of the bulk of Bengali literature in the Gauṛ and Nadiyā periods. They were non-Aryan, anti-Brahmanic, opposed to the caste system, and mainly prevalent among the lower sections of the population. They were called *laukik* or vulgar<sup>6</sup> in order to distinguish them from the orthodox Brahmanism that obtained among the minority at the top, and their gods and goddesses too were called *laukik* in order to distinguish them from the classical gods and goddesses. Excluded from the Aryan fold, they lived a submerged life among the lower classes in the villages, and were untouched by any higher culture except the Buddhist. They derived their democratic spirit from Buddhism,

<sup>1</sup> See p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> See p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *sahaje pāchāli git nānā dosmay.*

<sup>4</sup> *pāchālīte nahe yogya vād.*

<sup>6</sup> In the sense of belonging to common people.

and many of them originated from disintegrating Buddhism. That religion had its main following among the non-Aryan masses at the bottom of Hindu society, and it found a natural refuge among the same masses in its last days. That is how some Buddhist deities, transformed and perverted by the popular mind, reappeared as *laukik* deities. Manasā, Chandi, and Dharma are instances in point.<sup>1</sup> In their new forms those deities were at first worshipped by the common people, but in course of time they gained followers among the upper classes, and they finally became well established as Hindu deities. Their literature tells us how that happened.

A new culture was thus rising in the centuries preceding and succeeding the Muslim conquest. It was a folk culture centring on the emergent *laukik* deities, and it had Bengali, the emergent vernacular, as its vehicle. The decline of orthodox Brahmanism and classical Hindu culture before the Muslim conquest, and their virtual extinction after the conquest, gave the new culture full opportunity to grow. Bengali literature simultaneously found room to grow in the gap left by Sanskrit. The new culture rose by mass pressure from below, and in spite of the disfavour with which it was regarded by the orthodox Brahman cleric. As the custodian of classical culture the Brahman cleric, or priest-pandit (as we shall call him),<sup>2</sup> was always conservative, and he now became more conservative than ever in his anxiety to protect his charge in the dark days after the Muslim conquest. His own cultural and economic interests, vested as they were in Sanskrit, made him averse to Bengali; all the more because Bengali was a new language, rude and uncultivated. There was, besides, much in the new culture to earn his disfavour. In his view the *laukik* cults were low and lax, occult and indecent, and they undermined Hindu society by their non-observance of caste. The deities were low-born rustic deities, village clods worshipped by village clods. Many of the cults, again, had been exploited by decadent Buddhism; they were soaked (the priest-pandit might have thought) in insidious Buddhist propaganda, and their deities were Buddhist wolves in Hindu sheep's clothing. To complete the priest-pandit's unhappiness, these barbarous and disruptive cults were spreading apace, and the upstart deities of the village were threatening to

<sup>1</sup> See p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> The position and function of the Indian priest-pandit were similar to those of the medieval European cleric.

usurp the thrones of the classical deities. It is not surprising to learn, therefore, that Chaitanya's father, an orthodox Brahman, would not become a priest of Chandi, even though it would have benefited him financially to have become one. We also know from the literature of these cults that the aversion to them was not confined to the Brahman community. Châd Sadāgar of the Manasā fable and Dhanapati of the Chandi fable were members of the mercantile community, and they chose to suffer rather than worship Manasā and Chandi.

Nevertheless the cults grew. Detested by the priest-pandit, but loved by the masses, they acquired nation-wide popularity and influence. Slowly but surely they infiltrated the upper classes of Hindu society, and their victory was complete when the Brahman community, the longest to resist, threw up the sponge. Some Brahmans even went so far as to act as priests to them and to contribute to their literature, though to do that was to court social ostracism. In the autobiographical passage of his Dharma poem Mānikrām Gānguli<sup>1</sup> relates how, on being ordered by Dharma to write a poem in his honour, he cried in fear: 'I shall lose caste, lord, if I sing your song.' Caste, however, had often to be sacrificed to economic necessity. Sources of livelihood were drying up in the orthodox fold, and it was more lucrative to serve the *laukik* cults. The old royalty and aristocracy who were the traditional patrons of the Brahmanic faith had become extinct or impoverished since the Muslim conquest, and the wealthy people of the day were being increasingly drawn to the new cults. According to the *Chaitanya-bhāgavat*<sup>2</sup> Brahmans who acted as priests of Manasā and Chandi in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries made better livings than their orthodox brethren. 'They dwell in houses which they have bought, they are well fed and well clad.' We are not surprised to hear this, as we know from the Manasā and Chandi poems that these goddesses had established themselves among the wealthy mercantile community. As the *laukik* cults spread among the upper classes the quality of their literature improved; mainly because of the Brahmans with knowledge of Sanskrit literature who now served them as priests and poets. The status of the *laukik* deities simultaneously improved. Manasā and her colleagues were no longer represented as plebeians, but as relatives of the olympians. Manasā was made Siva's daughter, Chandi was made

<sup>1</sup> See p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 50.

Siva's wife. Modern deities and deified saints, such as Dharma and Goraksanāth, who could not be infused with blue blood, were represented as the all-powerful masters of the olympians. In this way the plebeian deities gate-crashed into the classical pantheon, and the non-Aryan cults made a niche for themselves in the Aryan temple. And in this way, also, the new culture affiliated itself to the classical tradition. As the new culture gathered strength it enriched itself more and more with Sanskrit learning and the refinements of Sanskrit literature. Hence the classical renaissance which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries nourished the shoots of the young Bengali literature.

It has been stated above that the new culture was a folk-culture which rose by mass pressure from below, and which found room to grow in the disruption of Hindu society and orthodox Hindu culture that took place after the Muslim conquest. The new culture had a special source of strength in the fact that it was common to both the Hindu and Muslim masses, and Bengali, its vehicle, was the common language and literature of these masses. The great majority of the Muslim population of Bengal, being converts from the lower classes of Hindu society, retained after their conversion their love for the cults and deities of the village, and continued to cultivate them with the same spontaneous delight with which their Hindu ancestors had done. These cults and deities were their racial heritage, and the essential part of their communal life in the village. Many of the cults were as old as time; some, such as the Sahajiyā, Krisna, and Nāth cults, were the relics of primitive cults of sex and magic; others, such as the sun cult, had roots in primitive nature-worship and dim racial memory; while others again, such as the snake cult of Manasā, the tiger cult of Daksin Rāy, and the cult of Siva the ploughman, reflected the actual conditions of life and work in the village. The differences which different religions impose on human beings vanish before the deep realities of communal life, and the lower sections of humanity have a natural tendency towards unity and uniformity. Until the disruption of Bengal's village life in British times, the basic unity of her Hindu and Muslim population was never disturbed. The unity arose out of racial oneness, common economic interest, and the communal life of the village. Even now it is usual for Hindus and Muslims of the villages to take part in one another's social festivities, including those which are based on

religion. Such was the love of the Muslim population for these Hindu cults and deities that a considerable part of their literature was the work of Muslim poets. The basic unity of the Hindu and Muslim masses also expressed itself in the attempts that were made at a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. The work of many Hindu and Muslim poets of the Gaur and Nadiyā periods was inspired by the synthesis.

The resurgence of Hinduism that began in the second half of the fifteenth century has often been wrongly regarded as a revival of Brahmanism. It was Brahmanic only in the limited and secondary aspect of the affiliation it secured for itself in the Brahmanic tradition, and of the revival of classical learning it brought about. Its main driving power came from the *laukik* cults, and its essence was the self-assertion, after many centuries of submerged existence, of the non-Brahmanic and non-Aryan masses and their culture. Disrupted and impoverished by foreign domination, the upper-class Hindu society of those days could only keep itself alive by reinforcing itself with the new masses who were then surging up and clamouring for recognition. There was, besides, the danger of those masses going over to Islam, then the state religion, if Hindu society did not make them its own. The danger was all the greater because Islam, unlike Hinduism, was a proselytizing religion, and did not hesitate to use force to secure converts. It was therefore vitally necessary for Hinduism to relax its social rigidity and exclusiveness, and even abandon them, if it wished to keep its masses to itself. That is why many Brahmans and other upper-caste Hindus split away from their own class and allied themselves with the masses and their culture. That is also the reason why between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries there were several mass movements within Hinduism for the removal of social inequality and for the unification of the people in a common brotherhood. Vaisnavism was the greatest of these mass movements, and it was led by Chaitanya, a Brahman. In that age of great upheaval, when a new humanity and a new culture were rising, the largest and the most influential part of the leadership came from among the upper classes of the old order which was crumbling. By birth and acquirement leaders like Chaitanya were among the best representatives of the old culture, and for that reason they were the best qualified to impregnate the new culture with the higher consciousness of the old. The new had the vitality, but also

the crudity, of an emergent folk-culture, and it needed the directing and refining influence of the old culture before it could yield its finest fruit. That influence was provided by men like Chaitanya, and one of the happy results was the Vaisnava literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

When after the Muslim conquest Sanskrit ceased to be a living language, it came under the exclusive care of the pandit. It then became, like Latin in the exclusive care of the schoolman in medieval Europe, over-sophisticated, hide-bound, sterile, and snobbish. It lost touch with life and reality, and ploughed a lonely furrow in the barren fields of hyper-subtle scholasticism. It no longer fed on the Upanisads and the other pure streams of ancient Indian culture, but on the muddy and stagnant pools of the middle ages. All this was inevitable in view of the unfavourable circumstances in the midst of which the pandit preserved the tradition of Sanskrit learning. But it was also inevitable that the modern spirit would rebel against the pedantry, rigidity, and obscurantism into which that tradition had degenerated in the pandit's keeping, and would evolve a new classicism by rediscovering and rehabilitating the pristine sources of Hindu culture. Like the English Renaissance, the Bengali Renaissance of the nineteenth century led the human spirit backward from the darkness of the medieval night to the light of the classical dawn. The 'Back to the Upanisads' movement of Rāmmohan Rāy<sup>1</sup> is an example of this. The history of Bengali literature in the nineteenth century may be studied as a fight between the conservatism of the pandit<sup>2</sup> and the radicalism of the westernized writer. The fight is practically over now, and the pandit has got the worst of it. The disappearance of his influence is no more to be regretted than the disappearance of the father's influence when the son comes of age.

Of the two sources, classical and indigenous, from which Bengali literature has sprung, the first, which is the older, may be said to have supplied the body, and the second the spirit. From its earliest beginning until the nineteenth century Bengali lived a second-hand life on materials almost entirely derived from Sanskrit. But though it drew its physical sustenance from the classical source, it remained essentially indigenous in spirit. It hardly ever acquired

<sup>1</sup> See p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Many individual pandits were on the side of progress. Vidyāsāgar was the greatest of them.



the adult and civilized consciousness, the high culture, and intellectuality of Sanskrit. As in the days of its origin, its essential spirit almost always remained dark and mystical, semi-conscious and semi-articulate. It was religious rather than artistic, musical rather than poetic, sentimental and emotional rather than intellectual, communal rather than individual. It lived in the village, and was confined within the limited range of ideas and experience of a rustic people. As a folk literature it no doubt possessed the simplicity, freshness, and charm of its genre, and was able, at rare moments of intuitive experience, to have direct vision into the life of things. But its main bulk, relying almost entirely on the heart and the spirit and almost entirely devoid of objectivity and intellectuality, could only be banal and platitudinous.

That was the unhappy legacy of the social and political disruption in the midst of which Bengali grew up, and of the long medieval night in which it was born and spent its youth. The medieval spirit affected it like infantile paralysis, and prevented it from taking from Sanskrit the best that Sanskrit could have given. The Sanskrit models that Bengali took for its Maṅgal poems<sup>1</sup> were the medieval Purāṇas, not the ancient epics, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*. Adaptation or translation into Bengali invariably meant vulgarization and emasculation of the Sanskrit originals. The *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, for example, comparable to mighty rivers in their epic grandeur and richness, shrank into thin trickles of rustic piety in their Bengali versions. The most inferior aspects of Sanskrit poetry—e.g. its exaggerated lusciousness and sentimentality, its stereotyped manner and ideology, and the trickeries of its clichés and conceits—seem to have had the greatest appeal for Bengali poets. Hence the repetition *ad nauseam* of such jaded imageries from Sanskrit as the eye-bee of the lover flying to the lotus-face of the beloved, and his heart thirsting for her love as the bird chakor thirsts for the rays of the moon. The main reason why Bengali was unable to meet Sanskrit at the latter's higher levels is to be found in its religious character. Born in the service of the *laukik* cults it remained in their service up to the nineteenth century, and its main incentive was not literary but religious, if not sectarian; for the *laukik* cults had their own separate sects of followers, and their literature was exclusively concerned with their own deities and saints, their own creeds and

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 32-3.

doctrines. The classical revival which nourished Bengali in its youth was primarily a religious, not a literary, movement. The resources of Sanskrit literature were explored primarily for the authoritative religious works which resurgent Hinduism needed. Literary considerations either played no part in the exploration, or were incidental to the religious and sectarian. That explains why the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, an authoritative work of the Kṛṣṇa cult, received the attention of imitators and translators, while the works of Kālidāsa, the greatest Sanskrit poet, had no particular influence.

At the present day Bengali no longer plays a subservient role to Sanskrit, but meets it as an equal and at its higher levels. This is an indication of the vitality and modernity it has acquired since it came under Western influence in the nineteenth century. The more modern-minded Bengali became under the stimulus of the West, the more did it purge itself of its medieval characteristics, and the nearer did it come to the pure founts of ancient Indian culture. This may be illustrated by a comparison between Rāmprasād Sen and Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest devotional poets before and after A.D. 1800. Rāmprasād was a worshipper of the goddess Kālī, and owed his inspiration to medieval theology; while the religious poetry of Rabindranath was washed in the waters of the Upanisads. Those two poets also illustrate the eclipse and the re-emergence of the great Sanskrit classics. Kālidāsa, for instance, was never sought by Rāmprasād or any of his contemporaries and predecessors; but he was one of the influences on Rabindranath's lyric poetry. Rabindranath indeed addressed Kālidāsa several times in verse, which shows that he went to him consciously and was aware of a spiritual closeness to him. This is only one of the many instances that might be given to show that the relationship between Bengali and Sanskrit has now been put on a proper literary basis. Sanskrit is still the main source of religious inspiration, but our writers of to-day also go to it for purely literary reasons. This lately acquired freedom of the literary spirit has expanded the horizon of Bengali, and has enabled it to discriminate between the good and the bad in Sanskrit. The freedom bore immediate fruit in the nineteenth century in the form of the first, and so far the greatest, epic in our language. Had the *Meghnād-vadh* of Madhusudan Datta been written in a previous age it would have gone the way of all the other Bengali poems based

on, or adapted from, the *Rāmāyana*: it would have become a devotional, not a heroic, poem. In the past Bengali has derived many false standards and values from Sanskrit, and many Sanskrit works still enjoy an undeserved reputation in Bengal. It is to be hoped, therefore, that the freedom of the literary spirit will continue to grow, and the relationship between Bengali and Sanskrit will be freed of the still lingering traces of the religious influence. Only a virile classicism, untrammelled by religion and guided by modern literary standards, will enable Bengali to take the good that there is in Sanskrit and to reject the bad.

The medieval night had already set in when Bengali was born, and it did not end until the nineteenth century. For over a thousand years the Indian intellect slumbered, and produced no new thought or knowledge, no new system of science or philosophy. One naturally thinks in this connexion of the great and manifold achievements of the European intellect, and the consequent improvement and modernization of the standard of European life, in the four centuries following the Renaissance. As life prospered in Europe, so did literature prosper too. In India, on the other hand, both life and literature remained stagnant, medieval, confined to a low level, and religion-ridden. The decline of the Indian intellect not only brought about the virtual disappearance of the arts and the sciences; it also brought about a deterioration of the religious spirit. (The philosophical tradition of Hinduism practically died with Sāṅkara in the ninth century A.C., and the later religious life of India was almost exclusively dominated by the Vaisnava doctrine of Bhakti or devotion to a personal god. The older religious systems, such as the Vedic and the Buddhist, had rested on speculative and metaphysical heights attainable only by the cultured few; and their concepts—such as the Absolute of the Vedānta, the Nirvana of Buddhism, and the Advaita of Sāṅkara—were too abstract, neutral, and impersonal to satisfy the masses. Bhakti, on the other hand, satisfied the craving of the masses for an emotional religion by giving them a god with whom warm and intimate communion as between one human being and another could be established. And for that reason it flourished.

Besides developing its own individual character through Vaisnavism, Bhakti infused its spirit into other cults and creeds, and finally absorbed them all. It flung its net wide over the current gods and goddesses irrespective of their age, standing, character,

or denomination, and made them its own. Whether it was the ancient and classical Visnu or the modern and indigenous Chāṇḍī; the beautiful Kṛṣṇa, the spirit of love, or the ugly Kālī, the spirit of destruction; the sublime Siva, the embodiment of a philosophic principle, or the ridiculous Manasā, the rustic snake-goddess with broken hips and blind of one eye—the indiscriminate and overflowing heart of Bhakti made them all into equal objects of adoration. Its all-pervasive god-making zeal extended to Rām, the hero of an epic poem; to Sakti, an abstraction of Tantra philosophy; and even to the all too human, rational, and sceptical Buddha. In its lower manifestations Bhakti rid itself altogether of the intellect, and merrily deified sticks and stones, animals, trees, and what not. To say all this is not to forget the important services Bhakti performed. It unified, however loosely, the various cults and creeds by emphasizing the spirit of religion above the form, and by providing the common denominator of devotion as the thing that really mattered in religious life. No less important was its reforming influence, particularly on such cults as Tantra, Nāth, and Sahajiyā. It removed their crudities, obscenities, and inhumanities, and it fought the looseness and lawlessness into which Jain and Buddhist free-thinking had sunk by demanding absolute obedience and selfless devotion to a personal god. What is more, it supplied the main stimulus to Bengali and some other Indian vernacular literatures up to the nineteenth century. Though it has all this to its credit, the point will still have to be made that it was an over-simplified and over-emotional religion-made-easy movement. By its very nature it increased the sway of religion over a people whose low standard of life already made them prone to religion. In this it was helped, though indirectly, by the Muslim conquest. The conquest introduced a period of incessant warfare and ruthless oppression for which there is no parallel, even in the unhappy history of India, except in the days of the East India Company. Religion, especially of an emotional kind, is always the anodyne of a people in distress, and there can be no doubt that the Bhakti movement took greater hold as the country grew more wretched.

Vaisnavism was the dominant religion after Buddhism, and its propagation by Chaitanya is in many ways one of the most glowing chapters in the history of Bengal. It spread with the dynamic force of a great revivalist movement, and provided an efficient

organization for those masses of the population who had been left without a refuge since the disappearance of Buddhism. It would seem hard to speak critically of a religion which was a great progressive force in its time, and which for sweetness and gentleness has few equals in the world; but Vaisnavism was one of the main influences responsible for the intellectual black-out, and the emasculation of national life, in pre-British Bengal. This was due to its over-emotional nature, to the almost exclusive attention it paid to the life of love (*prem*) and devotion (*bhakti*) in preference to the life of thought (*jñān*) and action (*karma*). In its craving for union with a personal god it lived entirely absorbed in the emotion of love, and entirely preoccupied with how to intensify that emotion to the utmost. With its elaborately designed cult of love, and its frenzied mass singing (*kirttan*) and dancing, it induced those states of mystical ecstasy and trance (*bhāv-dasā*) in which the intellect is blotted out and the powers of action are paralysed. Chaitanya's biographers proudly relate how he tied up his Sanskrit books, never to reopen them, when he heard the call of the spirit. But then Chaitanya was a scholar and comparatively well off, and the call of the spirit was for that reason a different thing for him from what it was to the vast majority of his followers who lived in poverty and ignorance. Like many other religions before it Vaisnavism made the mistake of trying to raise the spiritual level of a people without at the same time trying to raise their material and intellectual level. Instead of helping its followers to improve the real world in which they lived, it enticed them away to an unreal world of its own fabrication. In that unreal world Krisna and Rādhā always made love in the *tamāl* grove by the Yamunā, the cowherds and the milkmaids always sang and danced under the *kadamba* blossom, and the human soul eternally sought the divine over-soul in mystical ecstasy. The effect was like that of strong wine on an empty stomach. For two centuries the Bengali people sang, danced, and passed out in an ecstatic trance while the world around them remained sunk in ignorance and misery. Vaisnavism had no social, economic, or any other consciousness except the erotic and the mystical, and the poetry it inspired was exclusively dominated by eroticism and mysticism. In its reaction against the arid formalism, and the hyper-subtle and futile intellectualism, into which Brahmanism and Buddhism had degenerated, it went to the opposite extreme of virtually disowning the intellect altogether.

There was some respite from it in the nineteenth century, brought about by the 'Back to the Upanisads' movement of Rāmmohan Rāy and the rational-secular influence of Western education. But its intoxicated spirit (*mātuārā prān*) reappeared before the century was over, when the newly awakened interest in Bengal's national heritage led to the revival, more enthusiastic than informed, of the old Vaisnava poets. Much of modern Bengali poetry is for that reason a reversion to the sentimentalism and emotionalism of those poets. This applies not only to the less important modern writers who knew no better models, but to the work of such major and westernized writers as Rabindranath Tagore and Chittarañjan Dās. On Rabindranath the Vaisnava influence was limited to literary qualities, but on Chittarañjan it was all-pervasive, including his adoption of the Vaisnava faith. The re-emergence of Vaisnavism and Bhakti shows how firmly they have embedded themselves in the national tradition, how subtly they have drugged the national consciousness. With their emotional abandon and mystical rapture they still provide the most insidious escape from the realities of life.

In view of the unfavourable conditions of the age, it is not at all surprising that Bengali literature should have grown up with many defects and shortcomings. The important thing, however, is that it has since developed into what it is to-day. It is the premier modern Indian literature, and occupies a high place among the second-class literatures of the world. The vitality that enabled it to do that largely derives from its popular origin. Although there were many writers in the Gauṛ and Nadiyā periods who were patronized by royalty and the aristocracy, the literature itself always had its roots in the village and never acquired a chivalric or feudal consciousness. If, as the result, Bengali missed the wider outlook and the refinements of high life, it also escaped the moral degeneration that often goes with that life. It was undeveloped and uncultivated, but not perverse or depraved. On the contrary, it had a fundamental simplicity and sincerity, unity and integrity. Because it was a literature of the people it had those reserves of power which came out under the stimulus of the West and made it what it is to-day. Its proletarian association was no doubt responsible for its crudity and its religious obsession, but that association was also what made it so national. The stories of Bipulā, Dhanapati, Kālketu, Lāusen, and the like which formed a large part of its

repertoire until the modern period were all of native growth, not derived from Sanskrit or imported from outside Bengal. Those stories grew out of the common life like grass out of the common soil, and they lived in the mass memory, and on the lips of popular minstrels, for a long time before they were written down. From the communal life, too, came the folk-tales, which never found their way into literature and have come down orally.

## CHAPTER II

### GAUR PERIOD

#### (i) *Up to the Fifteenth Century*

THE Pūthis (manuscripts) in which the Bengali incunabula were preserved were generally of *tulaṭ* or stained paper dressed with sulphate of arsenic. The average measurement of the sheets was 12 inches by 6 inches, and the writing was parallel to the longer edge of the page. A reed pen was used for writing. The outer covers were of wood, and were generally decorated with pictures or designs. The sheets and the covers were unsewn, and were held together with one or two strings. It was customary to wrap up the *pūthi* in a piece of cloth when it was not in use.

As already stated, the majority of the existent manuscripts are of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and there is none older than the manuscripts of the *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan* (c. fifteenth century) and the *Charyā* (c. twelfth century).

The authorship of the incunabula rests entirely on tradition. Manuscripts were few, and the literature circulated orally, on the lips of minstrels, until printing was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century. The authors had the Indian custom of attaching their names to their works in the form of a Bhanitā or personal address. The Bhanitā (loosely translated as colophon) usually appeared as the concluding line or couplet of a poem, and in a long poem it appeared many times, concluding every section of the poem.

Listen, brethren, listen with attention,

Gunarāj Khān relates the death of Kāṁsa.<sup>1</sup>

As a rule the Bhanitā was short, and amounted to little more than the author's signature, but sometimes, as in the *Rāmāyana* of Kṛttivās and in the Chanḍi poem of Mukundarām, it gave a fair amount of information about the author. It would, of course, be a mistake to suppose that the Bhanitā was always successful in safeguarding the purity of the text. Instances are not uncommon of imitators and interpolators passing off their work on a famous author by the simple device of inserting into their work a Bhanitā bearing the famous author's name. Kṛttivās and Chanḍidās have had much spurious stuff foisted on them in this way. Additions

<sup>1</sup> *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-vijay* by Gunarāj Khān (i.e. Mālādhara Vasu).



and alterations were also made, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the minstrels who sang or recited the poems, and by the scribes who copied the manuscripts. The communal character of the literature, and the consequent idea that it was common property, encouraged alteration and interpolation. Even so, the problems connected with the authorship and text of the Bengali incunabula are not so numerous or difficult as one would expect in the circumstances.

An account of Bengali literature should properly begin with the *Gita Govinda* of Jaya Deva, because, although Sanskrit, it has enjoyed great popularity and influence in Bengal. Jaya Deva flourished in the twelfth century A.C. An annual fair is still held in his honour in the village of Kendubilwa, on the bank of the river Ajay, where he was born. The current legends about him and his wife Padmāvati are mostly untrustworthy, but it seems certain that he lived for some time in the temple of Jagannāth in Puri. The *Gita Govinda* has been called the Indian Song of Songs—an apt description in many ways. It sings of the love of Krisna and Rādhā with an intensity of physical passion, and with a wealth of sensuous imagery and verbal music, of which there are but few equals in the world. All the same it is a sick rose, sick with its own excess.

We should not forget, however, that the *Gita Govinda* was meant to be sung. The over-colouring that appears as a flaw in the poem would not, perhaps, appear so in the song; it would be redeemed by the music, and would even appear as the pre-requisite of the music. As the poem was but the prelude to the song, and as the element of music removed it to a different level of consciousness, it would not be altogether fair to judge it by the standards of poetry alone. The same is generally true of all Bengali poems written before the nineteenth century. There is a certain impropriety in applying to them the standards of pure literature, because their poetry was accessory to the music and did not live a life of its own. This is particularly true of the poems which were devoted to religious or semi-religious cults of a mystical nature.

The musical and mystical character of Bengali literature fully appears in the fragment that is now generally believed to be its earliest extant specimen. The *Charyā*,<sup>1</sup> a collection of short songs

<sup>1</sup> Or *Ācharya-charyā-chaya*, to quote its own tongue-twisting description of itself.

by Buddhist teachers (*siddhāchāryas*) of the Sahajiyā cult, is in *mātrāvritta* metre,<sup>1</sup> and it mentions the various modes in which the songs were meant to be sung. Designed to provide hints for the esoteric practice of Sahajiyā, it uses a highly symbolic and mystical jargon (*sandhyā bhāṣā*) whose inner meaning is always hidden to us, and whose outer sense, too, is rarely clear. The manuscript, recently discovered<sup>2</sup> in the state library of Nepal, bears evidence of the religious and cultural relations that existed between Bengal and Nepal in the middle ages. The manuscript originally contained fifty-one songs, but only forty-seven have been preserved, as the scribe omitted one and the pages containing three have been lost. From the Bhanitās that appear in the songs we know that the collection represents twenty-two authors of whom at least one was a woman. The *Charyā* was discovered in the company of three collections of songs in non-Bengali dialects and a Sanskrit commentary, and its language is now generally believed to represent the stage when Bengali had just emerged from Māgadhi Apabhraṃsa. The twelfth century is generally believed to be the date of the manuscript, and the eleventh century—between A.D. 950 and 1100 to be more precise—as the probable date of composition of the songs.<sup>3</sup> Some of the songs are echoed in *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kirttan*, but the *Charyā* has no literary pretension; its sole interest is historical and linguistic. It is the only extant work which on the evidence of both subject-matter and language can be placed in the Buddhist age prior to the Muslim conquest.

There are other works, viz. *Ḍāk o Khanār Vachan*, *Gorakṣa-vijay*, *Mina-chetan*, *Maynāmatir Gān*, and *Sunya-purān*, whose content suggests their possible origin in the same Buddhist age which saw the *Charyā*. But as the language in which they are preserved is not older than the seventeenth century, they will be noticed in the later chapters. An exception will be made, however, of *Ḍāk o Khanār Vachan*, because of its singular character. It is a collection of aphoristic sayings about the cultivation of crops, house-building, tree-planting, characteristics of women, the twelve months of the year (*Vāramāsi*), and other topics of interest to a primitive people at home and on the fields. Many of the sayings

<sup>1</sup> Based on *mātrā* (*mora*) or weight of the syllable.

<sup>2</sup> By Haraprasād Sāstri who edited it under the title *Bauddha Gān o Dohā*.

<sup>3</sup> See Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*.

have become household proverbs, and some are delightful in their quaintness and *naïveté*.

The woman who ties her hair loose; who throws away water so that she may go out to fetch it from the pond; who frequently looks over her shoulders as she goes, and casts furtive glances at passers-by; who sings while lighting the evening lamp;—such a woman should not be kept in the house.

The words *Ḍāk* and *Khanā* mean wisdom or a wise person, and *Ḍāker Vachan* and *Khanār Vachan* should be interpreted as Sayings of the Wise. Current legends attributing the sayings to a real man named *Ḍāk* and a real woman named *Khanā* should be unhesitatingly discredited. Caution should also be exercised about ascribing the sayings to the Buddhist age. Some of the sayings show a vague Buddhist influence in their sceptical character, but their language, if it ever was old, has become modernized on the lips of many generations. In their present form the sayings are no older than the eighteenth century.

After the *Charyā* there is no definite evidence of any literature for four hundred years. There are vague references to a few authors,<sup>1</sup> but no trace of their work remains. This does not mean, however, that those years were altogether barren. On the contrary, there are reasons to believe that the same Buddhist age which saw the *Charyā* also saw the nucleus, if nothing more, of some other literature: the nucleus, in particular, of the poems of the *Manasā*, *Chandī*, *Dharma*, and *Nāth* cults. Of those poems themselves there is no definite evidence before the fifteenth century, but we can be sure that the fables which form their subject-matter had their origin in the same Buddhist age as the cults. An unfailing characteristic of the *laukik* cults is that each had a fable to glorify its deity, and the recital of that fable formed an essential part of its ritual. The same characteristic is found in the *Vratas* (minor cults of a domestic nature) of the present day; they too have fables<sup>2</sup> which are duly recited as part of the ritual. As the *laukik* cults were originally prevalent among the lower classes of the population, their fables would at first circulate orally on the lips of village priests, minstrels, and story-tellers. Only after a long time, when the cults had spread among the upper classes, would the fables receive the attention of poets with sufficient ability to put them into literary form. Even then the manuscripts of this kind of literature,

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *Kānā Haridatta*.

<sup>2</sup> Called *Vrata-kathā*.

composed in the vernacular tongue and mainly intended for the lower classes, would be liable to perish for lack of care. This would explain, at least partly, the apparent barrenness of the four hundred years prior to the fifteenth century. But the suggestion is being put forward here that literature continued all the while to circulate orally and to be stored up in the communal memory. So tenacious indeed was that memory, and so widely did the cults spread over the country, that when the fables appear in literary form from the fifteenth century onwards, they are found already to have acquired the character and dimension of national legends.

In those four hundred years poetry was not only developing its content; it was also evolving a standard metrical measure. This was the Payār, the heroic couplet of Bengali poetry, and its principal medium until the nineteenth century. When poetry reappears—properly begins, to be more correct—with Krittivās's *Rāmāyana*, the Payār is found to have already established itself. Its silent and unhesitating acceptance by Krittivās, as if it was something old and authorized by tradition, suggests that there were poets before him who had used it, though their work has been lost to us. It will be remembered that there was a period of anarchy and devastation following the Muslim conquest.

Peace returned to Bengal in the middle of the fourteenth century, when Elias Khān became sultan. From the fifteenth century onwards conditions became favourable for literature to revive and to flow in a continuous stream. The three hundred years that had elapsed since the Muslim conquest produced a change in the attitude of the Muslim rulers. They no longer regarded themselves as alien invaders, but as permanent dwellers in the land, and some of them took an interest in the literature and culture of the people they ruled. Several instances are known of the patronage of Bengali poets by the Muslim royalty and nobility of the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The patronage was the outcome of genuine interest, and not merely a matter of state policy.

<sup>1</sup> In the fifteenth century Mālādhār Vasu was patronized by Sultan Ruknuddin Bārbak Shāh; and Vijay Gupta, Vipradās Piplāi, and Yasorāj Khān by Sultan Hussein Shāh. In the sixteenth century Sultan Nasrat Shāh patronized Kavirañjan, and Ālāuddin Phiruz Shāh (Nasrat's son) patronized Sridhar (to write his *Vidyā-Sundar*); Parāgal Khān, the governor of Chittagong, patronized Kavindra (to write his *Mahābhārata*); and Chhuti Khān (Parāgal's son) patronized Srikanan Nandwi (to translate the Aswamedha canto of the *Mahābhārata*). All these poets except Yasorāj Khān were Hindus, and all of them wrote on Hindu themes.

The revived literature fell from the outset into three broad divisions which persisted until the end of the Nadiyā period. The first division consisted of translations of Sanskrit works, most notably of the *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata*, and the *Bhāgavata-purāna*. The translations had great educative and ethical influence, and were the main channel through which the literary and linguistic resources of Sanskrit flowed into Bengali. Their largest crop was in the eighteenth century, and their greatest examples are the *Rāmāyana* of Krittivās and the *Mahābhārata* of Kāsirām Dās. The second division, larger than the first, consisted of the Vaisnava literature. It subdivided itself into several groups which will be noticed later. The devotional and love-songs known as the Vaisnava Pads are among the most beautiful things in our literature to the present day. The third division, the largest of the three, consisted of the narrative and other poems arising out of the *laukik* cults. The narrative poems, generally known as the Maṅgal or Vijay Kāvya, imitated some features of the Sanskrit Mahākāvya, but were closely modelled on the Sanskrit Purānas, and they sometimes even called themselves Purānas. They absorbed a mass of local folk-lore and legend, and are among the best guides we have to the social condition of Bengal prior to the nineteenth century. We have already said that some Buddhist deities, perverted and transformed by the popular mind, reappeared as *laukik* deities in the days when Buddhism was in decline. Manasā, for instance, was the Buddhist Taritā, Chandi was the Buddhist Bajra Tārā, and Dharma was the Buddha himself. These and other *laukik* deities were originally worshipped by the lower classes, but in course of time they gained followers in the upper ranks of society.

The literature had a strong religious, even a sectarian, character, and was obviously designed to spread the doctrines of the particular sects. The Vaisnavas of Bengal carried on the tradition of active propaganda for which their sect was noted through the ages, and wrote about their own deities and saints, and on their own aesthetics and theology. The literature of the *laukik* cults, too, was entirely concerned with the description of their own ritual<sup>1</sup> and with the glorification of their own saints and deities. The glorification of the saints and deities was the particular function of the Maṅgal or Vijay poems, and it took the form of relating fables which demonstrated the prowess of the saints and deities.

<sup>1</sup> As in the *Sunya-purān*.

As is to be expected in this class of literature, the demonstration had all the *naïveté* and crudity, the blatancy and ruthlessness, with which primitive religions propagandize themselves. Minanāth, Goraksanāth, and Hāripā, the principal saints of the Nāth cult, were represented as omniscient and omnipresent, and altogether more powerful than the gods in heaven. They were endowed with occult powers, and they did the most fantastic things. The *laukik* deities were represented as rewarding with prosperity the men and women who followed them, and as punishing with adversity the men and women who did not follow them. The Manasā poems tell us how Manasā rewarded Bipulā who worshipped her, and punished Chād who refused to worship her. Chād was the follower of a rival deity, and was subjected by Manasā to the most severe afflictions. In the Chanḍi poems Chanḍi rewarded her votary Kālketu, and punished Dhanapati who worshipped a rival deity. Dhanapati's afflictions were great, though not so great as Chād's. Lāusen, the hero of the Dharma poems, prospered by the grace of Dharma, and vanquished Ichhāi Ghos, the follower of a rival deity. Other instances could be given of the cruelty and kindness which the *laukik* deities employed to get men and women to follow them. They smote down all opposition, however strong, and were always victorious in the end. That is why the poems which glorified them proudly called themselves by the title of Vijay Kāvya or victory poems. The victory these deities gained was usually twofold: over a disobedient human, and over a rival deity worshipped by that human. As a means of further propaganda among their simple-minded audience the poems called themselves Maṅgal Kāvya, or poems which conferred benefit on the people who heard them recited. The title Vijay referred to the cruelty with which the deities conquered their adversaries, and the title Maṅgal referred to the kindness with which they rewarded their votaries.<sup>1</sup>

It has been already said that prior to the nineteenth century Bengali poems were meant to be sung. When old Bengali poets refer to their works as songs, as they very often do, they mean to be understood literally. Short poems, such as the Vaisnava Pads, were songs in the fullest sense, and were meant to be sung according to the regular musical modes. Quite often the author himself

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prescribed the modes. Long poems, such as the Maṅgal poems, were composed as *pālās* or pieces for semi-musical and semi-dramatic performance. The words were delivered in recitative music interspersed with dramatic and dancing movements, and accompanied by musical instruments such as the *mridaṅg* and the *mandirā*. The professional and mendicant minstrels, known as the *Maṅgal-gāyak* and *yugi*, who gave these performances, sometimes performed singly, but most often in bands. The *gāyen* or leader of the band was the soloist, and his assistants, known as the *doār* or *juri*, were the chorus. For recitals of Maṅgal poems it was customary for the leader of the band to have a crown on his head, an *ektārā* or some other musical instrument in his hand, and bells (*nupur*) on his ankles. The recital generally lasted longer than one day or night; the Chandi poems were written in eight parts, and were sung in eight days or nights.<sup>1</sup> The name Pāñchālī or Pāchālī by which the long poems were often called possibly originated from the *pañchalikā* or marionette shows which in ancient times accompanied their recital. Mention should also be made here of the Kathak, or professional story-teller, who in the past was almost as important a social figure in the villages and towns as the priest. The fables from the Purāṇas and other ancient literature with which he entertained and instructed his audience by the evening lamp were recited in a semi-musical, chanting manner.

### (ii) Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

Very few books have become such an essential part of the life of a people as has the *Rāmāyana* of Kṛttivās Ojhā. Its influence and popularity have been such as would justify its being called the Bible of the people of Bengal. There is no home in that country which does not possess a copy of it, no man or woman who does not know some of its verses by heart. This is partly due to the greatness of the original *Rāmāyana*, and to the almost religious reverence in which it is held by the Hindus, but more to the sweet simplicity and charm with which Kṛttivās retold it in his mother tongue. A translation of the great classical epic in a language so little developed as was Bengali in Kṛttivās's time was in itself a courageous undertaking; and it was all the more courageous because of the prevailing conservatism which frowned upon such undertakings. The Sanskrit *Rāmāyana* and Purāṇas were universally

<sup>1</sup> That is why they were called *aṣṭa-maṅgalā*.

regarded as sacred, and their purity was zealously guarded by the classicist priest-pandit. To translate them into the vernacular languages amounted to profanation in the priest-pandit's eyes, and he had even imposed an unofficial ban<sup>1</sup> on such translations. But Kṛittivās, though himself a Brahman pandit, flung aside those inhibitions with the courage of a pioneer and an innovator. His work is more than the first, and so far the best, *Rāmāyana* in Bengali verse; it is the herald of the great classical renaissance which in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries poured the treasures of ancient Sanskrit literature in a golden shower over Bengal. What is of greater importance, it is the foundation stone of Bengali literature. Kṛittivās was primarily interested in the ethical rather than the literary value of his work, but he is nevertheless the father of Bengali poetry.

Considering how little we know of the life of early Bengali writers, we cannot be too grateful to Kṛittivās for the account he has left of himself in the Bhanitā of his poem. He was born in the village of Phuliyā on the Ganges, where an ancestor named Nara-siṃha Ojhā had migrated from east Bengal. His father's name was Vanamāli, his mother's Mālini, and he had five brothers and a step-sister. After finishing his education he went to Gauṛ to gain recognition in the royal court, and there he composed five verses which he sent to the king by the officer at the palace gate. On being brought before the king—and Kṛittivās does not forget to describe the palace and the court—he greeted him with seven more verses. The king immediately recognized Kṛittivās as a scholar and a poet, garlanded him, and promised to grant him any reward asked for. But the proud Brahman cared for honour alone, and would not accept a gift from anyone. The king was all the more pleased, and ordered Kṛittivās to compose the *Rāmāyana* in Bengali. The poet was as happy and proud as a child.

When I came out [of the palace] people came running to see me, thinking that I was a wonderful man. . . . They cried in joy: Blessed are you, O scholar of Phuliyā. As Vālmiki is lauded among the sages, so are you among the scholars.

Kṛittivās does not mention the king's name, but his description of the palace and the court makes it certain that the king was a Hindu. This points to Ganes, who was the only Hindu king of Gauṛ in the fifteenth century, and who ruled from c. 1409 to 1414.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 14.

Krittivās was born towards the end of the fourteenth century, probably in 1380.<sup>1</sup>

Krittivās did not set out to make a literal translation of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyana*, but to retell its main story in his own way. His work was not intended for the learned, who, knowing Sanskrit, would have preferred in any case to read the original. It was intended for the common people, and it has all the engaging qualities of first-rate folk literature. The grand style of Vālmiki's epic is beyond its reach, nor is it faithful to its original in respect of incident and character. Original incidents have been freely omitted and modified, and new incidents, in all probability derived from Bengali folk-lore, have been freely interpolated. The characters represent the popular, even the rustic, ideals of Krittivās's Bengal, with little or nothing of their original heroic spirit. Apart from the persistence of the main outlines of the original story, Krittivās's work is his own. Just as the classical Greek and Latin epics underwent physical and spiritual changes in the romantic versions of mediæval Europe, so did the classical Sanskrit epics undergo physical and spiritual changes in the vernacular languages of India. Instances of the main changes introduced by Krittivās and other translators of the *Rāmāyana* will be given later.<sup>2</sup> An important reason for thus putting Krittivās in the company of the later translators is that his work has not come down to us in its original purity. Its great popularity made it common property, and in its present form it contains much that is the work of interpolators. The genuine and the spurious, the original and the interpolation, have become inseparably fused in the course of five centuries. The language, too, has altered and become almost modern.

Krittivās used the Payār, which henceforth remained the standard verse-form until the nineteenth century. The Payār—perhaps its original name was Padachār—is a rhyming couplet with four feet in each line. It is based on *mātrā* (*mora*), the first three feet having

<sup>1</sup> This date is derived from calculations based on Krittivās's pedigree. But it conflicts with his own statement in the Bhanitā that he was born on a Sunday which was also the fifth day of the new moon and the last day of the month of Māgh: *Ādityavār sripañchami purna māgh mās*. The only day that answers that description is the 11th of February 1442. But 1442 as the year of Krittivās's birth would rule out Ganes as his royal patron. It has therefore been suggested that in the manuscript where the statement occurs *purna māgh mās* (last day of the month of Māgh) is a mistake for *punya māgh mās* (auspicious month of Māgh).

<sup>2</sup> See p. 75.

four *mātrās* each and the last foot having two *mātrās*. The medial caesura falls after the second foot, and the lines are end-stopped.

Among the Sanskrit Purāṇas the *Bhāgavata* comes next to the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* in popularity and influence. It is the gospel of the Vaisnavas, and the story it tells of Kṛṣṇa, the god of love, has been the primal source of inspiration of Indian love-poetry since the Middle Ages. Generations of Vaisnavas and non-Vaisnavas alike have taken delight in the incidents of Kṛṣṇa's early life as a cowherd in Vrindāvan. Even to-day there is nothing sweeter to the Indian heart than such images as Kṛṣṇa playing the flute by the waters of the Yamunā, Kṛṣṇa playing games with his friends in the fields and woods, and Kṛṣṇa making love to the milkmaids in the *kadamba* groves. No other province of India took Kṛṣṇa so close to its heart, or produced such beautiful poetry about him, as Bengal did. It is therefore only to be expected that in the classical renaissance of the period under review the *Bhāgavata* should have been the Purāṇa which received the most attention from the Bengali translators. The earliest of these translators was Mālādhara Vasu, a native of Kulingrām near Burdwan, and a high official under the Sultan Ruknuddin Bārbak Shāh, by whom he was decorated with the title of Gunarāj Khān.

Mālādhara's *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-vijaya* is inspired throughout by ardent religious feeling. Chaitanya knew it, and praised it to Mālādhara's son. It has some passages of charming sweetness, as for instance the following excerpt from the account of Kṛṣṇa's early life.

In the morning Kṛṣṇa and his brother lead the cattle to the bank of the Yamunā. The cowherds follow, sounding their horns and driving the cattle before them. Assembling by the river they sport in the water. Here the young monkeys leap merrily [on the trees], and Kṛṣṇa and his mates leap like them. Here the peacocks dance, and Kṛṣṇa dances like them. When the kokil [a bird] cries, Kṛṣṇa and his brother cry with it. As the birds fly in the sky, Kṛṣṇa and his brother pursue their shadows on the earth.

Mālādhara's poem is a free version of the *Bhāgavata* as Kṛttivāsa's poem is a free version of the *Rāmāyana*. It justifies its title of a Vijaya poem in so far as it represents Kṛṣṇa as smiting down his adversary Kāṁsa, and as performing other feats of heroism. But it emphasizes Kṛṣṇa the lover far above Kṛṣṇa the hero, further indeed than the *Bhāgavata* does. In that emphasis we see the beginning of that spiritualizing process which will be completed

by the later Vaisnavas of Bengal. As a result Krisna will be entirely divested of his heroic character, and will be transformed into a pure figure of love. Consistent with that process is the appearance of Rādhā as Krisna's beloved in Mālādhār's poem. Rādhā is not found in the *Bhāgavata*, and was introduced by Mālādhār from other sources (such as the *Gīta Govinda*). From now on Rādhā will be a permanent figure in the Krisna literature of Bengal, and she will ultimately play an even more important part than her consort. The later Vaisnavas will make her the symbol of the perfect lover, and of the human spirit craving for union with the divine. They will adorn her with the choicest blossoms of their spirit in pursuance of their idea that woman's capacity for love is greater than man's, and the perfection of love is best attainable through the physical and emotional experiences of woman. To seek God with the wholeness of body, mind, and soul with which Rādhā seeks Krisna is the essence of the later Vaisnavism.

Besides being the first work on the Krisna cult, *Sri-Krisna-vijay* is of further historical interest as the first work to bear the date of its composition. The author states in the Bhanitā that the poem was begun in 1473 and finished in 1480.

In both literary and linguistic interest the *Sri-Krisna-kirttan* by Baṛu Chāṇḍidās ranks above all other works of this period. It has been preserved in a language which is the author's own or very nearly so, and its content, too, is of original or near-original purity. The manuscript is a recent discovery, and the title by which the poem is now known was invented by the discoverer.<sup>1</sup> The first, last, and some other pages of the manuscript are lacking, and the writing bears evidence of three hands belonging to different times. Expert linguist and epigraphist opinion regarding the date of the manuscript has varied between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, and we have accepted the latter as being the safer. That also gives the fifteenth century as the latest date when the author could have flourished, and we have placed him in the fifteenth century to be on the safe side again.

The discovery of *Sri-Krisna-kirttan* has thrown new light on the authorship of a large number of Vaisnava Pads (short songs) bearing the name of Chāṇḍidās in their Bhanitās. In spite of their

<sup>1</sup> Vasantarañjan Rāy, who discovered the manuscript in the village of Kākinyā in Bankura district in 1909 and edited it in 1916.

widely varying quality those Pads were believed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to be by a single author. But it now seems fairly certain that there were two, and possibly more, authors bearing the name of Chanḍidās. The discovery of *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan* revealed that some of those Pads originally formed part of that poem, and were, therefore, by the same Chanḍidās who wrote it. This Chanḍidās flourished before Chaitanya, and described himself in the Bhanitās of *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan* as Baṛu, and as a worshipper of the goddess Bāsali.<sup>1</sup> He is also the Chanḍidās who met Vidyāpati, if we assume that the tradition that exists about the meeting of those two poets refers to the Maithili poet Vidyāpati.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that this Baṛu Chanḍidās is the Chanḍidās whose work was well known in Chaitanya's time<sup>3</sup> and to Chaitanya himself.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, a difficulty about his name as it appears in the Bhanitās of *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan*. The name generally appears as Baṛu Chanḍidās, but on a few occasions it also appears as Ananta Baṛu Chanḍidās. Ananta does not at all fit in with the rest of the name, and no satisfactory explanation can be given of its presence.<sup>5</sup> There is also some difference of opinion about the meaning of the word Baṛu.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of the authorship of the other Pads is complicated by the varying names—Ādi Chanḍidās, Kavi Chanḍidās, Dwija Chanḍidās, and Dina Chanḍidās—that appear in their Bhanitās. Some think that the epithets *ādi* (original), *kavi* (poet), *dwija* (brahman), and *dina* (humble) are but the different ways in which the same poet—viz. the original Baṛu Chanḍidās, the author of *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan*—has described himself. This view gives us

<sup>1</sup> Another name for the goddess Chanḍi.

<sup>2</sup> Some suppose that the tradition refers to the Bengali poet Kavirañjan who was known as the minor Vidyāpati. See p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Sanātan Goswāmi, one of Chaitanya's principal disciples, refers to *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan* in his commentary on the *Bhāgavata*.

<sup>4</sup> Krisnadās Kavirāj says in *Chaitanya-charitāmṛta* that the songs of Vidyāpati, Chanḍidās, and Jaya Deva used to delight Chaitanya.

Vidyāpati chanḍidās srigitgovinda

Ei tin gite karāy prabhur ānanda.

<sup>5</sup> The following suggestions have been made: (a) that Ananta was the real name of the poet who called himself by the name of Chanḍidās, because he was a worshipper of Chanḍi; (b) that Ananta is the interpolation of his own name by the scribe who wrote the manuscript; and (c) that Ananta is the interpolation of his own name by the minstrel who recited the poem.

<sup>6</sup> Baṛu was interpreted by the discoverer of the manuscript as senior, elder; but it has also been interpreted as unmarried, celibate (*brahmachāri*).

one poet who described himself in five ways. Others take the opposite view that the different epithets denote different authors. This view gives us five authors with the name of Chandiḍās. There is yet a third view which limits the number of authors to two: viz. Baṛu Chandiḍās and Dina Chandiḍās. This now seems to be the generally accepted view. Dina Chandiḍās is supposed to have lived in the post-Chaitanya age, and to have been the author of the majority of the Pads. His major work is a long poem on the childhood (*bālyalilā*) of the god Krisna. It is further supposed that the tradition about the meeting of Chandiḍās and Vidyāpati does not refer to a meeting of Baṛu Chandiḍās and the Maithili poet Vidyāpati, but to a meeting of Dina Chandiḍās and the Bengali poet Kavirañjan,<sup>1</sup> who was known as the minor Vidyāpati. The Chandiḍās problem is still under investigation, but it is doubtful whether all its aspects will ever be fully solved, and whether the canon of even Baṛu Chandiḍās and Dina Chandiḍās will ever be finally determined. Speculation will do its best, but in the end Chandiḍās will always remain a composite name, a symbol of the communal authorship of the Pads that bear it.

Many stories are current about Chandiḍās, but it is difficult to say whether they are true and, if so, to which Chandiḍās they refer. Two villages have claimed to be his birthplace: Nānnur in Birbhum district, and Chhātnā near Bankura. He is said to have been a Brahman, and to have courted social ostracism rather than give up a washerwoman with whom he was in love. Tradition varies about the washerwoman's name, calling her Tārā, Rāmtārā, and, most often, Rāmi. The love-legend is as highly coloured as it is widely current, and has found expression in many poems in which Chandiḍās pours forth his heart to Rāmi. There are also poems in which Rāmi pours forth her heart to Chandiḍās, though it is difficult to believe that they were really written by that good lady. Even more highly coloured than the love-legend are the legends regarding the manner of Chandiḍās's death. It is said that the begum of a nawab of Gaur fell in love with Chandiḍās, and used to follow him about wherever he gave his musical recitals. The jealous husband blew up the house in which a recital was being given. According to another account Chandiḍās was tied to the back of an elephant by order of the nawab, paraded through the streets, and lashed to death.

<sup>1</sup> Of Srikhaṇḍa near Burdwan. See p. 47.

There are many episodes in *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan* which are not found in the classical sources of Kṛṣṇa's life, such as the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, *Harivaṁśa*, and *Bhāgavata*, and were most likely derived from local folk-lore. The poem, i.e. as much of it as has been discovered, is a long Vijay Kāvya in thirteen cantos, and its story is that of Kṛṣṇa's conquest (*vijay*) of Rādhā. Kṛṣṇa overcomes Rādhā's resistance, and exacts love from her, with the same ruthlessness as that with which a typical deity of the Vijay Kāvya exacts devotion from a disobedient human who worships a rival deity. He is utterly unscrupulous, and seduces Rādhā with all the cunning and crudity of a village lout. The poem disarms criticism with the primitive rusticity of the life it depicts, and with the frankness and unselfconsciousness of its sensuality. All the same, it has passages and episodes which appear disagreeable even after due allowance has been made for the different manners and morals of a bygone age. Barāyi, Rādhā's old grandmother, who acts as Kṛṣṇa's agent, would be an unattractive character in any society at any time. But the faults of the poem are redeemed by Rādhā's character. As a young girl awaking to womanhood, she is a remarkable creation for that age. She retains her naturalness and integrity throughout the poem, both in the earlier parts where she resists Kṛṣṇa's overtures, and in the later parts where, after he has taken her, she loves him with her whole body and soul.

Grandmother, who is playing the flute by the bank of the Kālindī  
[Yamunā]?

Who is playing the flute in the pasture-fields?

The music upsets my body, and it spoils my cooking.

Whoever is playing the flute, whoever he be, I shall be his slave, I  
shall offer myself at his feet.

For him it is mirth, but for me it is suffering.

My eyes stream ceaselessly, and my heart is lost in the notes of the  
flute.

All the Rādhās of later Bengali poetry will hear the flute played by Kṛṣṇa, but none of them will express herself with the homely simplicity and naturalness of the Rādhā of *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan*. 'The music upsets my body, and it spoils my cooking.' The Rādhā of this poem is a real woman, and not the sentimental and emotional abstraction that she too often became in the Vaisnava poetry of the post-Chaitanya age. The Kṛṣṇa of *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-kīrtan*, too, is real, having stepped directly out of the life around



his creator. He is the village Krisna of pre-Chaitanya Bengal, an anthropomorphic god if ever there was one, the crude metal which the post-Chaitanya Vaisnava poets refined and wrought into an image of perfection. But in so far as Rādhā and Krisna were subtilized and spiritualized by the later poets, they were also dehumanized; the woman and the man of the earlier poetry were transformed into the human soul and the divine over-soul of a spiritual allegory. The later poetry was the work, on the whole, of greater poets, and was therefore more beautiful. But it belonged to a world of allegory and abstraction, while the world of the earlier poetry, though less beautiful, was the real world where real human beings live and act. This difference is due to the change that came over the Vaisnava cult in the post-Chaitanya age. As the cult became more refined, so did the Krisna story. The earthiness, even lewdness, that naturally belonged to a rustic love-story of the primitive world were either discarded or sublimated. That may be the reason why the *Sri-Krisna-kirttan* fell out of favour with the post-Chaitanya Vaisnavas, and remained forgotten until its recent discovery.

Manasā is the mother and queen of the *nāgs* (snakes), and their presiding deity. The Manasā cult, and the fable attached to it, are supposed to have been current in Bengal long before the fifteenth century. The cult was very popular, particularly in east Bengal, and several places in various parts of the country still claim to have been the original scenes of the incidents related in the fable. The fable is not found in any of the Sanskrit Purāṇas or in any other part of India, and is most likely an indigenous product of Bengal. Manasā is also known by the name of Padmā, and the Manasā poems variously call themselves Manasā-maṅgal, Padmā-purāṇ, or Manasār Bhāṣān Gān. The poems glorify their deity in the characteristic manner of the Maṅgal Kāvya, and were originally meant to be sung at Manasā festivals as part of the ritual. As in all Maṅgal poems the Manasā fable remains substantially the same in the hands of the many poets who retell it, and the difference between one Manasā poem and another lies in the manner in which the poets retell the same fable and in the minor details they introduce.

The fable begins with the birth of Manasā, the daughter of Siva, and how she had to leave her father's home because of the ill treatment she received there from her stepmother Chandī. She

even lost one eye in a quarrel, leading to a hand-to-hand fight, that took place between her and Chāṇḍi. To avenge herself she resolved that the people who worshipped Siva and Chāṇḍi should henceforth worship her instead. With the help of her friend Netā<sup>1</sup> she soon established herself among the lower classes, and then, aiming higher, she wished to get *pūjā* (worship) from Chāḍ Sadāgar<sup>2</sup> of Champak Nagar. That would give her the social status she wished to acquire, because Chāḍ was the most prominent member of the wealthy merchant community. But Chāḍ was a staunch follower of Siva, and had nothing but contempt for Manasā. His wife was secretly initiated into the Manasā cult by Netā, but on discovering this Chāḍ was angry and kicked away the articles of worship. Manasā implored him with folded hands, but Chāḍ would not worship 'that blind and low-caste woman' (as he called her). He even broke Manasā's hips with a blow of his stout *hintāl* stick, with the result that she could no longer walk straight. Realizing that persuasion would not succeed, Manasā decided to apply force. She destroyed Chāḍ's garden-house (*guābāri*), drowned at sea his six sons with the rich merchandise they were bringing home, killed his friend Saṅkur Gaṇuriyā, and took away from him the *mahājñān*, a secret power Siva had given him. The seven gallant vessels, headed by the Madhukar, which Chāḍ took on a voyage to Simhal (Ceylon) were sunk by Manasā in the Kālidaha (Indian Ocean). Chāḍ returned home destitute and starving, but resolved as ever not to do homage to Manasā. His life was spared, but his greatest trial was yet to come. On the birth of his seventh son, Laksmindar, the astrologers had foretold that Laksmindar would die of snake-bite on the night of his marriage. So Chāḍ built a house of iron, without a hole or a chink in it, and took every precaution so that no snake could get near it. But Manasā was more powerful than he, and in that house of iron Laksmindar died of snake-bite on his marriage night.

The interest of the fable now shifts to Bipulā,<sup>3</sup> Laksmindar's bride. She was as good-natured and virtuous as she was beautiful and accomplished, and, though young, she had great strength of mind. She resolved at all costs to bring her husband back to life. The custom of the country was that a person bitten by a snake

<sup>1</sup> Also called Netravati.

<sup>2</sup> Also called Chandradhar and Chāḍ Bene.

<sup>3</sup> Also called Behulā.

should not be cremated or buried, but should be set afloat on a river on a raft. When Laksmindar's body was placed on a raft on the river Bākā, Bipulā sat down by it. To her relatives and friends who tried to dissuade her she said that a wife should be with her husband in both life and death. As the raft drifted towards the Gaṅgā (Ganges) many men and animals tried to tempt and frighten Bipulā, but she remained unshaken in her resolve. Nor was she frightened by her loneliness, by the wind and the rain and the darkness, and by the strangeness of the many lands through which she passed. Many days and nights went by, and Laksmindar's body was reduced to a skeleton. Then at the confluence of three rivers known as Triveni Bipulā saw a strange sight. A woman who came in the morning to wash a bundle of clothes in the river had with her a child whom she killed before she began her work, and whom she brought back to life before going home in the evening. Bipulā stopped the raft, and on the following day made friends with the woman, who was no other than Netā, Manasā's friend, and the washerwoman of the gods. In Netā's company Bipulā went to heaven, where she pleased the gods by her singing and dancing. The gods interceded for her with Manasā, who restored Laksmindar and his six brothers to life after receiving from Bipulā a promise that she would persuade Chād to worship her. The boats laden with rich merchandise were also restored, and Bipulā went home in triumph. Chād was still adamant in his hatred of Manasā, but relented under Bipulā's persuasion, and for the sake of her happiness. So the *pujā* (worship) of Manasā spread on earth.

The bare argument given above does scant justice to this gem of a folk-tale. A long succession of poets have been attracted by such romantic elements in it as the sea-voyage of Chād, the house of iron on Mount Sātālī, Bipulā's journey through strange lands, and the dark underworld and the fearful snakes over which Manasā rules. Chād's household under the shadow of many sorrows has supplied pathetic interest, and admiration has been aroused by the sufferings so nobly endured by Chād and Bipulā. The conflict that goes on between god and man in this poem is bitter, and might well have ended in tragedy but for the religious and sectarian purpose which the fable was intended to serve. Chād was more useful to Manasā alive than dead, and the fable had to end happily for him and for Bipulā if it were to be a glorification

of Manasā. To consider some other aspects of the fable: there is a spurt of drama in the watch Bipulā keeps over her sleeping husband on the fatal night. Manasā sends three snakes, one every quarter of the night, and Bipulā captures them all. Then in the last quarter the girl falls asleep with tiredness, only to be awakened by her husband's cry that he has been bitten by a snake. Bipulā on the raft beside her husband's corpse has become in Bengal a permanent symbol of wifely devotion, almost as permanent as the classical Sitā and Sāvitrī. But Chād has received less than his due, particularly from some of the later poets of the Manasā cult. In their devotion to Manasā these poets have omitted to do artistic justice to Chād, and they have exalted the goddess by degrading the human who dared to disobey her. But the original Chād had in his composition the essential granite of a great tragic character. He had a will stronger than the house of iron he built, and although Manasā broke him, she never could bend him. In the end he paid homage to Manasā, but only to make Bipulā and the rest of his family happy. Even so he turned away his face from the goddess, and gave the offerings with his left hand. If he gave in at all, it was really to Bipulā, not to Manasā. The Manasā fable represents the triumph of Manasā as it was designed to do; but to the modern mind it also represents the triumph, and perhaps a greater one, of Bipulā.

The earliest extant Manasā poem is the *Manasā-maṅgal* (or *Padmā-purāṇ* as it is sometimes called) by Vijay Gupta. According to his own statement in the Bhanitā the poet was the son of Sanātan and Rukminī, and was born in Phullasri, which he describes as *paṇḍit-nagar* or a city of scholars, and which is the modern village of Gailā in Barisal district. He says he began writing the poem in 1494,<sup>1</sup> and he mentions Hussein Shah as the sultan of Gauṛ at the time.

Vijay Gupta makes rude remarks about an earlier poem on the Manasā cult by Kānā Haridatta (called kānā because he was blind of one eye). Haridatta is generally supposed to have been the first Manasā poet, and he has been sometimes placed in the twelfth century. His work does not seem to have survived,<sup>2</sup> and it is

<sup>1</sup> 1484 according to some manuscripts. But Hussein Shah was not sultan at that time.

<sup>2</sup> The fragment given in Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Vaṅga Bhāṣā o Sāhitya*, does not seem genuine to me.

referred to as lost by Vijay Gupta. If we assume that Haridatta's work was already lost in Vijay Gupta's time, the latter's remarks about it seem gratuitous. How did Vijay Gupta know that Haridatta's work was bad if it was lost? Nor does the quality of his own poem, however great its popularity in east Bengal to the present day, justify his picking holes in other people's work. But it should be said in fairness to Vijay Gupta that his work has not come down in its entirety or purity. It should also be said that some of his passages describing contemporary life, e.g. the oppression of Brahmans by Muhammadan Kāzis, are remarkably graphic and have considerable historical value.

Another Manasā poem followed close on the heels of Vijay Gupta's poem. This was by Vipradās Piplāi who began his work in 1495, and who, too, mentions Sultan Hussein Shah.

Since the Muslim conquest Bengal had never known a monarch so powerful, and, in the latter part of his career, so benevolent, as Hussein Shah. His reign from 1493 to 1518 was of exceptional duration for that age, and it gave the country the necessary peace and security for cultural pursuits. We have already mentioned the writers who enjoyed the patronage of the Muslim royalty and nobility of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> One of Hussein Shah's state-officials was Yasorāj Khān, a Hindu who had embraced Islam. Yasorāj's *Krisna-maṅgal*, probably the earliest instance of a Muslim poet using a Hindu theme, bears evidence of the attempts that were made in pre-British Bengal to bring about a religious and cultural synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. The greatest ornaments of Hussein Shah's court were the two brothers Sanātan Goswāmi and Rup Goswāmi. They were ministers of state before they joined the Vaisnava order, and their importance in the Vaisnava movement is second only to that of Chaitanya. They were the greatest exponents of Vaisnava doctrines, and Rup, in particular, was a Sanskrit writer of distinction. His *Ujjwalānilamāni* and *Bhaktirasāmritasindhu* are the most authoritative expositions of the Vaisnava cult of Bhakti.

We step into the sixteenth century with the translation of the *Mahābhārata* by Kavindra and the translation of the Aswamedha canto of the *Mahābhārata* by Srikanan Nandwi. The former is the earliest translation of the *Mahābhārata* in our language. The view has sometimes been held that Parameswar was the real name

<sup>1</sup> See p. 31, footnote.

of the translator, and Kavindra was his literary title. Srikaran Nandwi's translation has sometimes been attributed to Kavindra. A poem on Vidya-Sundar,<sup>1</sup> the earliest on that subject in our literature, was written by Sridhar in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, and the poet Kavirañjan of Srikhaṇḍa, near Burdwan, flourished about the same time. The short amatory poems Kavirañjan wrote in the manner of Vidyāpati, the Maithili poet, earned him the name of the *chhoṭa* or minor Vidyāpati. But before we proceed farther into the sixteenth century we should take note of the new Vaisnavism led by Chaitanya.

Vaisnavism had been current in Bengal long before Chaitanya, but the impetus he gave to it made it the main channel through which the national genius expressed itself for three centuries. Though primarily a religious movement, it was a manifold expression of the human spirit, and it overflowed into many channels other than the religious. It was the religion of love, of human love intensified and sublimated into the divine, and its central doctrine was that of knowing God through Bhakti (devotion). Krisna, the god of the Vaisnava, is not a metaphysical abstraction, but a personal god to whom whole-hearted Bhakti can be offered. He assumes human form because he loves human beings and wishes them to love him. His beloved is Rādhā, the symbol of the human heart craving for union with God, and the allegory of Krisna and Rādhā represents the divine and the human seeking to complete themselves through love for each other. The Vaisnava sees no essential difference between the divine and the human, between the spiritual and the carnal, and he regards them as complementary to each other, and as different forms of the same thing at different levels of experience. The divine defines itself in the human, and the human perfects itself in the divine. God needs man as much as man needs God, but man can attain God only if he has Bhakti, and loves God as utterly and intensely as Rādhā loves Krisna. Human love (*prem*) is the only, and the greatest, training-ground for Bhakti, and none but the perfect *premi*k (lover) can become the perfect *bhakta* (devotee).

We have already said that Vaisnavism was democratic and welcomed all without distinction of caste or creed, rank or wealth. Some of its recruits had been Muslims, as for instance Haridās, one of the three greatest leaders after Chaitanya. Such leaders as

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 88-90.

Narottam, Syāmānanda, and Raghunāth belonged to the lower castes, while Advaita and some others came of high Brahman families. Men like Raghunāth, Rup, Sanātan, Narottam, and Rāmānanda Rāy had given up great wealth and high social position to join the order, while the great majority of the members were poor working people. The Vaisnavas observed equality between the sexes, even to the extent of electing women to positions of leadership.<sup>1</sup> The movement, it is needless to say, derived its main impetus from the personality of Chaitanya (1486-1534). Only the last twenty-four years of Chaitanya's life were given to Vaisnavism, yet within that time he made it the principal faith in Bengal and took it to many other parts of India. His followers believed him to have been heaven-inspired, even an incarnation of God. The Bengal Vaisnavas had their headquarters in Nadiyā, and they founded a branch association in Vrindāvan in the United Provinces. That association became a seminary of Chaitanyaite Vaisnavism under the direction of the Six Goswāmis. The works of Sanātan, Rup, and Jiv Goswāmi were written there, as was the *Life of Chaitanya* by Krisnadās Kavirāj.

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Jāhnavi Devi, Sitā Devi, and Hemlatā Devi.

## CHAPTER III

### NADIYĀ PERIOD

1500-1800 A.D.

THE Vaisnava poetry produced in this period was of three kinds: (1) expositions of Vaisnava doctrine and practice, (2) biographies of Chaitanya and other Vaisnava leaders, and (3) the Pads (short songs). Of the doctrinal works only those concerning the *Rasa-tattwa*, or exposition of the Vaisnava cult of love and devotion, have any interest for non-Vaisnavas. The *Rasa-tattwa* poems were based on the Sanskrit treatises, *Bhaktirasāmritasindhu* and *Ujjwalanilamani*, by Rup Goswāmi, and the best of them in the sixteenth century were the *Durllabhasār* by Lochan Dās,<sup>1</sup> the *Rasa-kadamba* by Kavivallabh, and the *Prem-bhakti-chandrikā* by Narottam.<sup>2</sup> Only the last two have any literary value. There was a larger number of such verse-treatises in the seventeenth century, the most notable of which are the *Rasa-kalikā* by Nandakisor Dās, the *Rasa-kalpavalli* by Rāmgopāl Dās, and the *Rasa-māñjari* and *Aṣṭarasa-vyākhyā* by Pitāmbar Dās<sup>3</sup>.

The biography was a genre altogether new to our literature. So far the literature had been monopolized by gods and goddesses, but now for the first time it took real and living human beings for its subject. This was a step towards that secularization without which no literature can live its own life in the fullest measure. For this the Vaisnava biographers deserve credit as pioneers. Their works provide a good deal of information regarding social conditions, and some of them have additional interest as contemporary records. Some of the biographers of Chaitanya take us outside Bengal and give us glimpses, however brief, of men and manners in southern and western India. Unfortunately the religious and sectarian motive is all-powerful, and all but overwhelms the artistic and the historical. Hence the lack of form and style in these biographical works, the lameness and baldness of their narrative, and their inattention to character and incident. Hence also the myths and legends, the miracles and supernatural stories, with which they

<sup>1</sup> See p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> The *Dinamani-chandroday* by Manohar Dās and the *Chaitanya-tattwa-pradīp* by Vrajamohan Dās also deserve mention.



are loaded. We read with pleasure how as a little boy Chaitanya was reprimanded by his parents for playing, as all little boys will sometimes play, among garbage; but we cannot restrain our incredulous laughter at the reply he is made to give: 'In my eyes nothing is clean or unclean. My one and undivided presence is everywhere.' This is only a minor instance of the fantastic lengths to which these biographers have gone to prove the divinity of Chaitanya. They care more for fiction than fact, and they render themselves absurd with excessive propagandist zeal. Their credulity and irrationality strike us as amazing, even though we remember that they had set out to write spiritual, not ordinary, biographies.

All the biographies of Chaitanya written in his lifetime were in Sanskrit: the *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-Chaitanya-charitāmṛita*<sup>1</sup> by Murāri Gupta, and the *Chaitanya-charitāmṛita* and *Chaitanya-chandrodaya* by Paramānanda Sen Kavikarnapur. The first two of these are long poems in the Mahākāvya style, and the last is a drama. The earliest biography in Bengali is the *Chaitanya-bhāgavat* by Vrindāvan Dās. It is a long poem composed within fifteen years of Chaitanya's death. Vrindāvan had never met Chaitanya, and he derived his information from Nityānanda, whose disciple he was, and a short account of whose life he included in the *Chaitanya-bhāgavat*. Nityānanda, Advaita, and Haridās were the major companions of Chaitanya, and the Big Three among the Vaisnava apostles. Vrindāvan wrote some Pads, but is not really a good poet. None the less his *Chaitanya-bhāgavat* is pleasant reading, and invaluable for Chaitanya's early life. His defects arise from his sectarian and propagandist purpose. Taking the *Bhāgavata* as his model (as the title of his work shows), he is always at pains to suggest the identity of the life of Chaitanya with the life of Kṛṣṇa. He accepts uncritically the current myths and legends about Chaitanya, and his primary interest is devotional rather than biographical. The *Chaitanya-maṅgal* by Lochan Dās<sup>2</sup> is smaller and less authoritative than Vrindāvan's work, but more popular. It gives no new information, but it has enjoyed great popularity, and still continues to be sung as a *pāchālī*, moistening the eyes of villagers with sentimental tears. The *Chaitanya-maṅgal* of Jayānanda, too, is a *pāchālī*, but without the attractive qualities of Lochan's poem. It gives

<sup>1</sup> This appeared recently, and is of doubtful authenticity. The original work of Murāri Gupta is supposed to have been a *karchā* or collection of notes.

<sup>2</sup> He also wrote some Pads and the afore-mentioned *Durllabhasār*.

some new information, e.g. about the manner of Chaitanya's death, but its reliability is doubted by orthodox Vaisnavas. Even graver doubts exist about the reliability of the *Karchā* (brief notes) by Govindadās Karmakār.<sup>1</sup> It was published so late as 1895, from a manuscript which was known only to the editor and which has since disappeared, and its language is modern. These are among the reasons why it has been suspected by some to be a forgery. However that may be, this brief record of two years or so gives some new and interesting information regarding Chaitanya's tour in southern and western India. Govindadās declares himself to be a blacksmith who became a personal servant of Chaitanya and kept private notes of what he saw of his master. There can be no doubt that much of the *Karchā* is spurious, but the possibility of its containing some genuine matter is not to be altogether excluded. It has the engaging qualities of simplicity and unconventionality, and is free from the propagandist bias of the other biographies. The most authoritative biography of Chaitanya in Bengali is the *Chaitanya-charitāmrita* by Krisnadās Kavirāj, written within a hundred years of Chaitanya's death. The author made use of the previous works of Murāri Gupta, Parmānanda Sen Kavikarnapur, Swarup Dāmodar,<sup>2</sup> and Vrindāvan Dās, and he shows judgement and integrity in handling his materials. He received his training in Vaisnava theology under the Goswāmis of Vrindāvan, and was initiated into Vaisnavism by Raghunāth. He is most original and authoritative on the concluding years of Chaitanya's life, for which he received his materials from Raghunāth. Besides knowing Chaitanya himself, Raghunāth knew Swarup Dāmodar who was a constant companion of Chaitanya in those years. Krisnadās is serious-minded and learned, but as a writer he is laboured, ponderous, and dull. His work is of inordinate length, and is written in a curious mixture of Bengali and Hindi, for which his long residence outside Bengal must have been responsible. His purpose is devotional rather than historical, as can be seen from his calling his work a *charitāmrita* (spiritual biography) rather than a *charita* (biography). There is a sad story attached to the work. Krisnadās began it when he was nearly eighty, and he devoted to it many years of patient industry. It was written in Vrindāvan, and its manuscript, and the manuscripts of some other

<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with Govindadās Kavirāj (see p. 56).

<sup>2</sup> His work seems to have been lost.

Vaisnava works, were seized by robbers at Visnupur (near Bankura) on their way to Nadiyā. The manuscripts were recovered, but not before Krisnadās had died of grief at the loss of his work.

No other biography of Chaitanya appeared in the sixteenth century, and there was none in the seventeenth. The *Chaitanya-chandrakaumudī* by Premdās,<sup>1</sup> written in the eighteenth century, is a free version of the Sanskrit drama, mentioned above, of Paramānanda Sen Kavikarnapur. Some information about Chaitanya crept into the Pads that were written about him after the sixteenth century. There was, besides, some account of him—and sometimes information of first-rate importance—in many of the biographies of the Vaisnava apostles that we are about to notice. Of the three major apostles, Advaita, Nityānanda, and Haridās, the first deservedly claimed the most attention of biographers. Advaita's father was the court-pandit of Divya Siṃha, the raja of Lāur (near Sylhet). This Divya Siṃha, calling himself Krisnadās after becoming a Vaisnava, wrote in Sanskrit an account of Advaita's early life. The *Bālyalilā-sūtra*, as this Sanskrit work was called, was the source of all the biographies of Advaita in Bengali. Two of these Bengali biographies, viz. the *Advaita-prakāś* by Isān Nāgar and the *Advaita-maṅgal* by Haricharan Dās, were produced in the sixteenth century. So much of these works is concerned with Chaitanya that they may with justice be called his biographies. A later book on Advaita, the *Advaita-maṅgal* by Syāmdās, belongs to the middle of the seventeenth century; and another, the *Advaita-vilās* by Narahari Dās,<sup>2</sup> probably belongs to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.

Sitā Devi, Advaita's wife, was a prominent figure in the Vaisnava movement, and was commemorated in two biographies: *Sitā-kadamba* by Visnudās Āchārya, and *Sitā-charit* by Loknāth Dās. The first belongs to the sixteenth century, and the second, not a very reliable work, is of a much later date.

The greatest names in the second phase of Vaisnavism are those of Srinivās, Narottam, and Syāmānanda. The second phase began in the concluding years of the sixteenth century, and was marked by intense proselytizing activity. Srinivās was in charge of the

<sup>1</sup> This was the adopted name of Purusottam Misra Siddhāntavāgis. He also wrote *Vaṃsi-sikṣā* (see p. 53) and some Pads.

<sup>2</sup> Probably the same person as Narahari Chakravartti (see pp. 53-4). Dās (= servant) was the generic title of humility assumed by many Vaisnavas.

manuscripts which were looted at Visnupur. After recovering the manuscripts he converted Vir Hāmbir, the local prince, and eventually established the Vaisnava faith in south-western Bengal. He is probably the same Srinivās who appears as the author of some Pads. Narottam, a fine singer, and the inventor of the Garenhāṭi mode of *kirttan* singing, was the main power behind the propagation of Vaisnavism in northern Bengal. He was, besides, a writer of considerable merit. We have already referred<sup>1</sup> to his *Prem-bhakti-chandrikā*, one of the best manuals of Vaisnava Rasa-tattwa. Some of his Pads are among the best of their type, and his devotional poem 'Prārthanā' has a permanent place in our literature. The meeting of Vaisnavas from all parts of Bengal that Narottam organized in his native village of Kheturi is of some historical importance. Syāmānanda's missionary activities in the Midnapur region and in Orissa were as important as those of his two colleagues in south-western and northern Bengal. He was probably the author of the Pads bearing the name of Syāmānanda.

Srinivās is the principal subject of the seventeenth-century biographies, the best of which is the *Prem-vilās* by Nityānanda Dās. In spite of being spurious in parts this book is indispensable for the history of Vaisnavism. The author is sometimes supposed to be the same person as Balarām Dās,<sup>2</sup> the famous writer of Pads. Three more works on Srinivās are to be noted: the *Premāmrita* by Haricharan Dās, the *Karnānanda* by Yadunandan,<sup>3</sup> and the *Anurā-gavalli* by Manohar Dās.

Most notable among the other biographies of the seventeenth century are the *Rasik-maṅgal* by Gopivallabh Dās, the *Vir-rat-nāvali* by Gatigovinda, and the *Vaṁsivilās* (also called *Muralivilās*) by Rājvallabh. The first is a life of Rasikānanda, the principal disciple and assistant of Syāmānanda, and is of value for the history of Vaisnavism in Orissa; the second is about Virchandra, the son of Nityānanda; and the third, a life of Chaitanya's companion Vaṁsivadan Chaṭṭa, gives some new information about Chaitanya.

In the eighteenth century there was another work on Vaṁsivadan Chaṭṭa, viz. the *Vaṁsi-sikṣā* by Premdās.<sup>4</sup> It has a certain amount of information about Chaitanya not found elsewhere. The greatest writer of biographies in this century was Narahari

<sup>1</sup> See p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> A disciple of Srinivās's daughter Hemlatā Devi. His other works include some Pads and some translations from Sanskrit.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 52.

Chakravartti.<sup>1</sup> He was probably the author of the *Advaita-vilās* mentioned above, and he is known to have been the author of a now lost life of Srinivās. Of his extant works the *Narottam-vilās* is mainly about Narottam, and the *Bhakti-ratnākar*, though mainly about Srinivās, also gives accounts of Narottam, Syāmānanda, and some other Vaisnava leaders. As a biography the *Bhakti-ratnākar* is second in importance only to the *Chaitanya-charitāmṛita* by Krisnadās Kavirāj, and it resembles that work in being more than a biography. A large part of it is devoted to theology, rhetoric, literature, and other matter, and it is best described as a Vaisnava encyclopaedia. It is one of the greatest works of its kind in our language. Of Narahari's learning, so conspicuous in this work, there is further evidence in the *Chhandah-samudra*, a treatise on versification, and in the collection of Pads entitled *Git-chandroday*. He was himself an able writer of Pads.

A Pad is a short song, and the term Pad-karttā by which the Pad-writers call themselves may be translated as song-maker. The Pads are the best things in the Krisna-Rādhā literature of Bengal, and the claim may even be made that they are the best things in the Krisna-Rādhā literature written in all the Indian vernacular tongues. They have supplied the main impulse to Bengali love-poetry for over three hundred years, and they have been imitated in modern times by Rabindranath Tagore and his junior contemporaries.

Vidyāpati lived in Mithilā in the fifteenth century, and wrote in the Maithili dialect. Strictly speaking he is not a Bengali poet, and he does not seem to have been a Vaisnava either. Even if he was a Vaisnava, his Vaisnavism was of a different type from that which emerged in Bengal after Chaitanya. His poems on the love of Krisna and Rādhā have nothing of the allegory and mysticism that were put into that theme by the post-Chaitanya Vaisnavas. They are nearer in spirit to Sanskrit love-poetry, and they are more secular than the Pads. All the same, Vidyāpati was the greatest influence on the writers of the Pads, particularly in respect of style and diction. He was the greatest poet of eastern India after Jaya Deva, and his vogue in Bengal was spread by the Bengali

<sup>1</sup> Also known as Ghanasyām Dās. He is to be distinguished from Narahari Sarkār, of Srikhaṇḍa near Burdwan, who in the sixteenth century wrote some Pads on Chaitanya; although the Pads written by the two Naraharis have got almost inseparably mixed up.

students who followed the ancient custom of going to Mithilā in search of learning. On their return they brought back with them Vidyāpati's poems and a desire to emulate him in their own works. A passage has already been quoted<sup>1</sup> which says that Chaitanya took delight in the songs of Jaya Deva, Vidyāpati, and Chandidās, and we can be sure that there were many others who did the same in the sixteenth century. So great was Vidyāpati's vogue in Bengal that he came to be regarded as a natural-born Bengali poet, and there are no ancient or modern collections of Bengali Vaisnava poetry in which he does not find the most honoured place. The province of Bihar, in which Mithilā is situated, was not separate from Bengal in those days, nor was there a fundamental difference between the Maithili and Bengali languages.

The bulk of the Vaisnava literature of Bengal was written neither in Bengali nor in Sanskrit, but in a mixture of Bengali and Maithili which came to be known as Vrajabuli. The Maithili element in Vrajabuli was the result of Vidyāpati's influence, of the imitation of Vidyāpati's language by his Bengali followers. Vrajabuli was a mongrel language, unnatural and incorrect, but it was nevertheless used extensively for the Pads and for other Vaisnava writings in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. It was also used by the nineteenth-century imitators of the old Vaisnava poets, as, for instance, by Rabindranath Tagore in his *Bhānusimher Padāvali*. From Bengal it spread to Assam, Orissa, and some other parts, and it may be described as a sort of Vaisnava lingua franca, if that title may be given to a literary, not a spoken, language. Its archaic and exotic sounds have had a romantic glamour for many Bengali people, but the present writer finds its charms shallow and pseudo-romantic, meretricious and pretty-pretty. Whatever naturalness and freshness it might have possessed for the earliest Pad-writers, it could not possibly outlast the sixteenth century, and it has since become the conventional jargon for conventional Vaisnava sentiment. Vraja in Vrindāvan was traditionally supposed to have been the place where Krisna and Rādhā lived in the *dwāpara* age, and Vrajabuli (the language of Vraja) came to be popularly regarded as the language in which Krisna and Rādhā spoke. In view of the extravagant propagandism of the Vaisnavas it would not be at all surprising if they were responsible for the appearance of this myth.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 39, footnote.

The popularity of the Pad as a form is seen from the more than 150 writers who practised it, and the more than 3,000 Pads that were produced, before the nineteenth century. Of these writers at least three were women, and eleven were Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of the Pad is comparable to that of the sonnet in Elizabethan England, and its golden period was the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, when Vaisnavism was in full spate. Among the earliest Pad-karttās were Murāri Gupta,<sup>2</sup> also known as the first biographer of Chaitanya; Narahari Sarkār<sup>3</sup> and Vāsudev Ghos, regarded as the pioneers of Pads on Chaitanya; and Vamśivadan Chaṭṭa,<sup>4</sup> equally well known as a musician and a Pad-writer. These writers regard Chaitanya as a god, and refer to his activities in a manner suggestive of the activities of Krisna in the *Bhāgavata*. They have more devotion than poetry. Better as poets are Lochan Dās,<sup>5</sup> noted for his light colloquial touch; Kavirañjan,<sup>6</sup> sometimes called the minor Vidyāpati; and Vasanta Rāy,<sup>7</sup> who has a delicate, frail music. But we have yet to mention the best: Narottam,<sup>8</sup> of unsurpassed devotional fervour; Balarām Dās,<sup>9</sup> unrivalled for the tender scenes of Krisna's childhood; and Jñān-dās and Govindadās Kavirāj,<sup>10</sup> who with Vidyāpati and Chanḍidās<sup>11</sup> are in the forefront of Pad-karttās. Jñān-dās, like Chanḍidās, generally writes in the native Bengali tradition, but Govindadās is of the Vidyāpati school and writes almost always in Vrajabuli. In some ways Govindadās is our greatest Pad-writer. He is unrivalled for verbal harmony, and he uses alliteration and other sound-effects with a skill that almost removes his poetry to the realm of music. A falling-off in quality is noticeable in the work of the seventeenth-century writers, the best of whom are Yadunandan,<sup>12</sup> Jagadānanda, Rādhāvallabh, Harivallabh, Rāmgopāl, Saiyad Marttuzā, and Ālāol.<sup>13</sup> These writers have some attractive features, but they have little to say that is original, and are on the whole content to echo

<sup>1</sup> For a list of Pad-writers see Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Of Srikhaṇḍa near Burdwan; see p. 54, footnote.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> See p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Of Srikhaṇḍa near Burdwan; see p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes placed in the seventeenth century.

<sup>8</sup> See p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> See p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Sometimes placed in the seventeenth century; not to be confused with Govindadās Karmakār (see p. 51).

<sup>11</sup> In the sixteenth century this would be Dina Chanḍidās (see p. 40).

<sup>12</sup> See p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> See p. 83.

the sentiment and music of their predecessors. As the original impulse of Vaisnavism ran out further in the eighteenth century, the Pad became more stereotyped in form and content. Premdās,<sup>1</sup> the brothers Chandrasekhar and Sasisekhar, Rādhāmohan Ṭhākur, Narahari Chakravartti,<sup>2</sup> and Dinabandhu Dās, not to mention the lesser writers, are at best competent purveyors of conventionalities.

The Pad-writers took over many things from the conventional Krisna-Rādhā pastoral, but they informed everything they took with a poetic beauty, a passionate intensity, and a spiritual meaning all their own. Never before in Krisna-Rādhā literature did the Yamunā flow so darkly as she now does in the Pads, never before were the *kadamba* and *tamāl* groves on her banks so beautiful. When Krisna plays the flute it is now heard in the pulsing of Rādhā's blood and in the stirring of her soul. When Yasodā (Krisna's mother) worries about the safety of the boy Krisna, we worry with her as we never did before. When Rādhā is separated from her lover we feel in our heart the pain she feels in hers. The cowherds, the milkmaids, the cattle, the peacocks, and the rest of the conventional machinery of the ancient pastoral idyll are here, but the passionate intensity of the Pad-karttās has made them alive and real. At the same time they are not so alive or real as to destroy the spiritual allegory and symbolism with which post-Chaitanya Vaisnavism invested the Krisna-Rādhā theme. As a matter of fact, the allegory and symbolism are very much in evidence, and the world of the Pads has the essential unreality of a romantic-spiritual arcadia. The archaic and exotic sounds of Vrajabuli confirm and enhance the unreality. In that arcadia Krisna has his symbolical blue body and yellow robe, and Rādhā has her symbolical white body and blue robe. The blueness of the garment enfolding Rādhā reminds her of her lover's embrace. The blueness of the rain-cloud and the peacock's neck also remind her of Krisna, and she loses herself in the thought of her lover as the human soul loses itself in the contemplation of infinity. Rādhā on her way to her Abhisār (love-tryst) is the symbol of the human soul on the hazardous way to its own perfection. The sky is always overcast, it thunders and it rains, and the path is always dark and dangerous, when she goes out in the night to meet her lover. She feels fear, but she conquers it, since love can only be perfect when fear has been conquered. After Rādhā was born her eyes remained closed

<sup>1</sup> See p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 53-4.



until Krisna came and opened them: he was the object she first beheld, and his was the permanent image that her eyes retained. She and her lover know each other intensely and utterly as man and woman, with all the knowledge, both joyous and painful, that the senses and the feelings can give. But their love is perfect only in those moments of ecstasy when they lose all sense of separateness and the one is not aware of the other as man or woman. The bounds of the body are dissolved in those moments, the distinctions of sex are transcended, and the individual and the finite are merged into the universal and the infinite. That is the supra-sensual, supra-personal, mystical state which is the goal of the Vaisnava. Earthly love then becomes a fit offering for God; Prem (human love) is sublimated into Bhakti (religious devotion), and the lover attains the freedom and tranquillity of a pure spirit. 'You will know what love is', Chaitanya had said, 'only when you know that man and woman are not different.' When Krisna plays the flute in these poems it is more than a lover calling his beloved. It is the all-captivating, all-compelling voice of the spirit calling for the renunciation of earthly attachment. Rādhā, the cowherds, the milkmaids, they all leave their homes and occupations in answer to that peremptory call; the cattle leave off grazing, and even the Yamunā stops in her course and flows back upstream. These and other such things assume a reality of their own when we hear the Pads sung. The music transports them to their proper sphere, it kindles their secret life, and we realize them darkly in our senses and in our spirit. But they pale like stars in daylight when we read the Pads as poems.

Love-songs so short as these<sup>1</sup> necessarily rely on sound more than on sense. The thought-content of the Pads is meagre and tenuous, and their main appeal is through their verbal music, which at times is so compelling as to make some of the Pads almost sing themselves.<sup>2</sup> To deprive them of their music, as would happen in translations, however competent, is to deprive them of their essential life. The present writer is very much afraid that their wings have been lost, and only their pygmy bones have been kept, in the passages offered below.

<sup>1</sup> The average length of a Pad hardly ever exceeds a dozen lines.

<sup>2</sup> As, for instance, the Pad by Govindadās beginning *Ḍhala ḍhala kāchā aṅger lāvani avani vahiyā jāy*. It is sheer word-music, incommunicable in another language; that is why I have made no effort to translate it.

What is the ache in Rādhā's heart?

She sits apart in solitude, and will not listen to any one.

On the clouds she fixes her eyes, her pupils unmoving.

She has lost appetite for food, and has put on the red garment of an ascetic [*yoginī*].

She has cast off the flowers from her hair and is looking at its colour.

She cannot take her eyes off the peacock's neck.

Chandīdās says it is the dawn of her love for Kṛṣṇa.

The carnal element in the Pads is almost as tenuous as the thought. It never blazes up in a flame, but burns dimly like a glow-worm light in the tropical darkness. The craving of the body is always there, but it is either submerged under lush rhetoric or it expresses itself in a blunt and generalized statement, lacking the vitality to blossom forth into concrete imagery. As in the opening words of a Pad on Purvarāg (dawn of love) by Jñān-dās:

My eyes cry for his beauty.

Every limb of my body cries for every limb of his.

My heart cries for the pressure of his heart.

In the following song by Govindadās, Rādhā in the unhappiness of her separation from Kṛṣṇa wishes that she might die, and her body might dissolve into the five elements.

Let my body become the dust on the path my lord treads.

Let it become the mirror wherein he beholds his face.

May the conflict between separation and death be over. May death unite me with Kṛṣṇa.

Let my body become the water in the pool where he bathes.

Let it become the gentle breeze that fans his body.

Let my body surround him like the sky wherever he roams, a blue cloud.

The rains have always been one of the main sources of inspiration of Indian love-poetry, and the Pads furnish some good examples of this. Among the best Pads is the following by Vidyāpati, a great master of verbal music. The original is rich in sounds suggesting a thunderous, rain-drenched atmosphere.

My friend, there is no limit to my unhappiness.

It is the month of Bhādar, it is raining heavily, and my house is empty.

The thunder is roaring, and the earth is filled with rain.

My lover is away in a foreign land, and the cruel Kām<sup>1</sup> is darting sharp arrows at me.

<sup>1</sup> The Indian god of love.

Delighted by the thunder the peacocks are dancing wildly, the frogs  
are croaking madly, and the *ḍāhukī*<sup>1</sup> is crying,  
Breaking my heart.  
All around is darkness, the night is deep, and the lightning is restless.  
Vidyāpati says, how will you spend this night without Hari?<sup>2</sup>

According to the Vaisnavas, only love can produce the highest state of spirituality in man or woman, and it does that best when it attains the utmost degree of intensification through the enhanced pain and pleasure of a relationship not sanctioned by society. So in the Pads Kṛṣṇa is a cowherd, and Rādhā is a princess and a married woman. Their story is developed through such stages as Purvarāg (dawn of love from seeing, or hearing of, each other), Dautya (message), Abhisār (tryst), Sambhog-milan (union), Māthur (separation), and Bhāb-sammilan (re-union in spirit). The lovers fulfil themselves by realizing each other through every form of physical and spiritual relationship: through affection, as between parent and child (*vātsalya*); through friendship, as between a man and a man and between a woman and a woman (*sakhya*); through devotion, as of a servant to his master (*dāsyā*); through tranquillity, as between two souls polarized with each other (*sānta*); and through the ecstatic oneness of a man and his mistress (*madhur*). To describe the last, which they regard as the highest form, the Pad-writers range over all the physical aspects of love including coition. They do this with an unhesitating frankness and a whole-hearted delight which free their work from the least suspicion of vulgarity and give it a naturalness that is very beautiful.

For the representation of feelings and sentiments the Pad-writers closely followed the Rasa-tattwa. As already stated, the Rasa-tattwa was the exposition of the Vaisnava cult of love and devotion. It was the work of the Vaisnava rhetoricians, such as Rūp Goswāmi, who followed, and refined upon, the classical Sanskrit rhetoricians. The Rasa-tattwa had some good things in it, such as the stages and forms of love mentioned above, but it was too vague and misty to be called philosophical. It had more ingenuity than substance, and was given to the accumulation of petty distinctions without a difference. Witness the more than 350 heads under which the emotion of love was classified in the *Bhakti-ratnākara*. The triviality and superficiality that one notices in many of the Pads is at least partly traceable to the Rasa-tattwa.

<sup>1</sup> A water-fowl.

<sup>2</sup> Another name for Kṛṣṇa.

In common with the poets of the other *laukik* cults the Pad-writers suffer from the limitations of their subject-matter. Just as the poets of the Manasā, Chandi, Dharma, and other cults relate fables whose main outlines were pre-determined and fixed, so do the Pad-karttās write on themes which were pre-determined and fixed. Their choice is restricted to the stages and forms of love that are described above, and what they have to say on this limited number of themes tends to become stereotyped. Their primary allegiance is to religion, not poetry, and they write in implicit obedience to the canons and conventions of their cult. Conventionality of subject leads to conventionality of expression, and very few of them have the genius to infuse new spirit into old matter. The majority lack the inclination as well as the genius, and are content to reiterate the stock ideas and images associated with the Krisna cult. An endless series of Pads on the hackneyed themes of Purvarāg and the rest is the result, and we tire of eternally hearing about Krisna's flute and Rādhā's robe, about dancing peacocks and lowing cattle.

The great defect of the Pad-karttās is their crudity, their lack of detachment and intellectual abstraction, and that is why they are incapable of transmuting their material into poetic values of a high order. Whether they are describing physical sensations with the joyousness of a Vidyāpati or pouring forth their poignant feelings with the abandon of a Chandidās, they are too close to their subject-matter, and too much dominated by it, to make great poetry of it. They do not seem to have been aware that feeling is the subject, not the object, of poetry, the raw material out of which poetic objects are created. Much of their work is spoilt by jaded conventionalities pilfered from Sanskrit erotic literature, as for instance by their comparison of Rādhā's eye to a lotus and of the pupil to a bee. Their sentiments are often artificial, and they frequently rely on overstatement to create the impression of intensity, as on the many occasions when an ecstatic or trance-like state is produced in Rādhā by trivial things remotely associated with Krisna. Not only the rain-cloud and the peacock's neck, or the *tamāl* and the *kadamba* trees, but a host of petty things remind Rādhā of her lover and send her into an ecstasy of love. Only by thinking of her as wholly allegorical can we get round the awkward doubts that common sense inevitably raises about her normality. The height of absurdity is reached in such Pads as the undeservedly

famous one by Govindadās in which Rādhā is training herself in the courtyard of her house for her secret visits to Krishna. As it is always dark night when she goes on those visits, she is walking about in her courtyard with her eyes covered with her hands. As the path is always thorny, and slippery with rain, she has planted thorns on the courtyard, she has made it slippery by pouring water on it, and she is walking on the thorns, and is cautiously pressing her toes into the moist earth to keep her foothold. She has, in addition, muffled her anklets with a piece of cloth so that they will not make a sound while she walks. One would think that the poet has made her ridiculous enough; but no. There is always the danger of meeting snakes on the way, so she has promised a snake-catcher her wristlets as the fee, and she is learning the art of catching snakes by the head. Surely a little common sense and sense of humour would have done the Pad-karttās a world of good.

The terms most frequently met in the Pads and in Vaisnava literature generally are those denoting the ecstasy, even the madness, of love; such as *rasollās*, *premonmād*, *divyonmād*, *preme pāgal*, and *preme mātuārā*. The poets betray a particular delight in using these expressions, and they are only too ready to put Krishna and Rādhā, particularly the latter, into a frenzied, trance-like state. In doing that they prove themselves good Vaisnavas, since the essence of their cult lay in the realization of those mystical values that are supposed to be born in the ecstasy of love. But they also make themselves worse poets than they might have been, because of the greater reliance they place on abandon than on the discipline of feeling. Nor can they be credited with much originality, inasmuch as the machinery they employ is the traditional, even hackneyed, machinery of medieval Sanskrit erotic poetry. In medieval India, as in medieval Europe, there was a canonical *ars amatoria* complete with such love-symptoms (*laksana*) as loss of appetite, sleeplessness, pallor, sighs, tears, shudders, shivers, starts, blushes, swoons, and so on. Every hero and heroine worth the name displayed those symptoms with desolating uniformity. Their physical features—of which a long and detailed list from top-knot to toe-nail was provided—also showed an unvarying similarity, particularly at such interesting ages as when the heroine grew up from girlhood to womanhood (*vayah-sandhi*). The Pad-writers use these clichés of Sanskrit erotic poetry with great satisfaction, and they add to them their own clichés about the trances and ecstasies with an

almost comical intensity. There result from all this a triviality, a sentimentalism, and an emotionalism that are rendered all the more mawkish by some of the *kirttan* modes that are employed in singing the Pads. We are enveloped in an atmosphere more soggy, dark, and heavy than the rain-soaked tropical night through which Rādhā goes to her tryst.

But there are compensating moments when sudden passion rips up the muggy sentimentality like sudden lightning ripping up a rain-sodden sky. As in the following lines which open a Pad by Dina Chanḍidās:

Who uttered Syām's [Kṛṣṇa's] name?  
Through my ears it pierced my heart,  
And set my soul aflame.<sup>1</sup>

Compensation is also provided by the following lines of Vidyāpati, where Rādhā's feelings have been transmuted by their own intensity into the fine flame of poetry.

How shall I tell what I feel?  
My love becomes new every moment.  
Ever since my birth have I beheld his beauty,  
Yet my eyes are not appeased.  
For millions of ages have I pressed my heart to his,  
Yet my heart is not appeased.

In spite of their allegorical-religious setting, the Pads can be read and enjoyed as pure love-poems, and they strike a human note that is altogether new in Indian vernacular literature. For the first time, in passages such as the above, human love is being valued for its own sake, and as something to be offered to another human being, not to a god. The poets themselves thought of Kṛṣṇa as a god, but we shall enjoy their work better if we think of him as a man. The human note is most intense in the Pads addressed by Chanḍidās to the washerwoman with whom he was in love. The Pads are a green spot in the arid waste of Indian devotional literature.

The Vaisnavas not only turned out a large volume of work, but they also took good care to preserve it. The Pad-saṃgrahas or Pad-collections they made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are a good example of this. Some of these collections are of additional interest as notable works of scholarship. The earliest was the *Kṣanadāgit-chintāmaṇi* compiled by Viṣṇunāth Chakravartī, himself a Pad-writer and a reputed scholar. Then followed

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Edward Thompson.

the *Git-chandroday* by Narahari Chakravartti<sup>1</sup> and the *Padāmrita-samudra* by Rādhāmohan Ṭhākur. The latter compiler, whom we have already met as a Pad-writer,<sup>2</sup> supplied a commentary in Sanskrit. The *Kīrttanānanda* by Gaursundar Dās, the *Samkīrttanāmṛita* by Dinabandhu Dās, and the *Mukundānanda* by Rādhāmukunda Dās were creditable performances, but the largest and the most authoritative Pad-collection has yet to be mentioned. This is the *Pad-kalpataru* by Gokulānanda Sen,<sup>3</sup> a work unrivalled for research, commentary, and presentation. With the *Pad-ratnākara* by Kamalākānta and the *Pad-rasasār* by Nīmānanda Dās we are in the nineteenth century, when the great Vaisnava impulse was already on the wane. There were several later collections, but as they were not called forth by the original Vaisnava movement, we need not concern ourselves with them.

These collections arrange their material under different sections, such as Purvarāg, Abhisār, &c., representing the different stages and forms of love laid down by the Vaisnava Rasa-tattwa. Each section has a Gaur-chandrikā which opens it as a prologue, and strikes what the Vaisnavas believe to be its spiritual keynote. It was the general practice at recitals to sing the relevant Gaur-chandrikā before singing the Pads. The Gaur-chandrikā was a novel feature for verse-collections, and it was introduced by the post-Chaitanya Vaisnavas to do propaganda for their faith. The main articles of that faith were the divinity of Chaitanya and his perfection as a human being. On the divine plane he was regarded as the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, and on the human plane he was regarded as the perfect lover. As a lover he was perfect because he experienced within himself not only the feelings of Kṛṣṇa for Rādhā, but also the feelings of Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa; he knew love both as a man and as a woman can know it. In pursuance of these ideas the Pads were preluded with Gaur-chandrikās which represented Chaitanya as acting and feeling in the same way as Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā act and feel in the Pads. For instance: the Pads on Kṛṣṇa's childhood (*bālya-līlā*) were preceded by a Gaur-chandrikā which described Chaitanya's childhood in a manner suggesting his identity with Kṛṣṇa; and the Pads describing Rādhā in a love-crazed state were preceded by a Gaur-chandrikā describing

<sup>1</sup> Also called Ghanasyām Dās. See pp. 52, footnote; 57.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Vaisnava Dās. His work was originally called *Git-kalpataru*.

Chaitanya in a similar state. Vāsudev Ghos, Narahari Sarkār, and some of the other authors of the Gaur-chandrikās describing Chaitanya's mystical experiences knew Chaitanya intimately and are believed by orthodox Vaisnavas to have been eyewitnesses of the things they wrote about. But the present writer, who is neither a Vaisnava nor a mystic, is inclined to regard the Gaur-chandrikās as imaginative reconstructions, rather than actual records, of Chaitanya's experiences. The purpose of the reconstruction was the obvious one of glorifying Chaitanya.

Closely allied to the Pads in subject were the Maṅgal (or Vijay) poems on Kṛṣṇa based entirely or partly on the *Bhāgavata*. The Nadiyā period saw a large number of these poems, but few of them rivalled the pioneer work, noticed in the preceding chapter, of Mālādhara Vasu. The best in the sixteenth century were by Mādhava Āchārya,<sup>1</sup> Devakinandan Siṃha, and Kṛṣṇadās. The *Kṛṣṇa-prema-taraṅgini* by Raghunātha Paṇḍita, a follower of Chaitanya, deserves mention in this connexion, although it is not strictly a Maṅgal poem. Of the even larger number that came out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the following were the best: the *Govinda-maṅgal* by Duhkhi Syāmdās,<sup>2</sup> the *Sri-Kṛṣṇa-vilās* by Kṛṣṇakīrkaṇa,<sup>3</sup> the *Hari-vaṃsa* by Bhavānanda, the *Kṛṣṇa-līlāmṛita* by Balarāma Dās, and the *Govinda-maṅgal* by Kavichandra Chakravartī.<sup>4</sup> The last work, in some respects the best version of the *Bhāgavata* in Bengali, was popular in south-west Bengal. The versions made by Parasurāma Chakravartī, Abhirāma Dās, Dwija Haridās and Gopāla Siṃha were also popular there.

The Manasā literature also received many additions in this period. The best in the sixteenth century was the poem by Vamsivadaṇa Chakravartī,<sup>5</sup> a native of Mymensingh district. The author is supposed to have been helped by his daughter Chandrāvati, some of whose other poetry is still locally current. Chandrāvati was betrothed to a Brahman youth who jilted her for a Muslim woman. Folk-songs about her unhappy love are still current in the Mymensingh region. A native of the same region was Nārāyaṇ

<sup>1</sup> See p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Might belong to the sixteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> A brother of Kāśirāma Dās (see p. 75). He also translated the *Bhakti-pradīp* from Sanskrit.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the translator of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* and as the author of Manasā, Dharma, and Sivāyaṇ poems. But there might have been more than one person bearing the name Kavichandra Chakravartī.

<sup>5</sup> The name sometimes appears as Vamsidās Chakravartī.



Dev,<sup>1</sup> the author of a *Manasā* poem whose popularity in west Bengal is second only to the popularity of Vijay Gupta's poem.<sup>2</sup>

The best *Manasā* poem in our literature was written by Ksamānanda<sup>3</sup> about the middle of the seventeenth century. The author sometimes calls himself Ketakādās (servant of Ketakā, i.e. *Manasā*), and he refers to a Muslim governor named Bārā Khān who died in 1641. Ksamānanda keeps his narrative within control by the sparing use of words and incidents, and he avoids the prolixity and coarseness common to *Manasā* literature. There was another *Manasā* poet named Ksamānanda, but his work was undistinguished. The poems by Visnupāl, Jagajjivan Ghosāl, Rām-jivan Vidyābhusan, Jivkrishna Maitra, Rājā Rājsiṃha, and many others of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have nothing to recommend them.

The Nadiyā period saw the finest flowering of the Chanḍi cult. The Chanḍi of Bengal is an indigenous deity, quite different from the Chanḍi of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. The poems glorifying her consist of two separate fables, and lack the essential unity of the *Mahākāvya*. The first fable relates how Chanḍi conferred her grace on a male devotee, and the second fable relates how she conferred it on a female devotee. Both the fables are indigenous, and owe nothing to Sanskrit literature except a few details.<sup>4</sup>

The first fable is of Kālketu, a young hunter of low birth, and of his wife Phullarā. They were a poor but virtuous couple, and Chanḍi decided to proclaim her greatness to the world through them. She assumed the form of a lizard of a golden hue which Kālketu captured and took home. The goddess then changed herself into a young woman of great beauty, and told Kālketu and Phullarā that she was a rich woman who had left her old husband. Being attracted to Kālketu, she wished to live with him, and she would make them rich if they let her stay. Needless to say this was a snare the goddess laid to test the virtue of husband and wife. Poor Phullarā was miserable at the prospect of losing Kālketu's love, and urged the goddess to go back to her husband. Kālketu, too, urged her to do the same, and he was ready to use force to make her go. At this proof of his virtue the goddess discovered

<sup>1</sup> Also wrote a *Kālikā-purāṇ* on the Siva-Durgā theme.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> The name sometimes appears as Ksemānanda.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Chanḍi as a lizard and as the Kamale Kāmini, taken from the *Vrihat-dharma-purāṇa*.

herself and gave him a ring of great value. With the money he got by selling the ring Kālketu built a great town named Gujarāt and founded a kingdom. Of the many people who came to settle in Gujarāt there was one Bhāru Datta, a crafty and impudent impostor. Gaining influence with Kālketu he oppressed the king's subjects and, on being found out, he was relieved of office and banished. In revenge Bhāru Datta instigated the neighbouring king of Kalinga to invade Gujarāt. Kālketu was taken captive, imprisoned, and tortured, but he remembered Chandi. The goddess, who never deserts a devotee, appeared in a dream to the king of Kalinga and ordered him to release Kālketu. After many years of happiness on earth Kālketu and Phullarā went to heaven.

Khullanā, the heroine of the second fable, was the young and beautiful daughter of a rich merchant of Ichhānagar. Her cousin Lahanā was the wife of Dhanapati, a wealthy merchant of Ujānagar. Lahanā and Dhanapati were middle-aged and childless, and Dhanapati, a pleasure-loving man, was fond of the pastime of pigeon-flying. One day a pigeon of his, being pursued by a hawk, took shelter with Khullanā, and on going to recover it Dhanapati fell in love with the girl. He married her, but had to leave home soon after on an errand of the king. In his absence Lahanā, following the advice of the wicked maid-servant Durbalā, persecuted Khullanā. The girl was ill fed, ill clothed, and made to tend goats in the fields, but in the midst of her humiliation and suffering she learnt to worship Chandi. Happy days returned to her on the return of her husband, but they were brief, because Dhanapati had to leave home again to bring some merchandise from Siṃhal (Ceylon). Khullanā was with child when he went.

On the sea near Siṃhal Dhanapati saw a marvel: a young woman of superb beauty sitting on a lotus on the waves of the sea, and swallowing and disgorging an elephant. He did not know that this vision of the Kamale Kāmini (Lady on the Lotus) had been vouchsafed to him by the gracious Chandi in her desire to make him her devotee. He told the king of Siṃhal about the marvel he had seen and, as the king did not believe him, he agreed to spend the rest of his life in prison if he failed to show the marvel to the king. So Dhanapati and the king went to the spot where Dhanapati had seen the Kamale Kāmini, but there was nothing to be seen, and Dhanapati was cast in prison.

In Ujānagar Khullanā gave birth to a son whom she named

Sripati,<sup>1</sup> and who on growing up set sail for Siṃhal in search of his father. At the same spot on the sea near Siṃhal he saw the same marvel as his father had seen. He, too, told the king of Siṃhal of what he had seen, and he agreed to forfeit his life if he could not prove the truth of what he said. So the king went with Sripati to see the marvel, but of course there was nothing to see, and Sripati was condemned to death. But Chaṇḍi stepped in and rescued both father and son. The king of Siṃhal gave his daughter in marriage to Sripati, and Dhanapati returned home with his son and daughter-in-law.

The world of the Chaṇḍi fables is larger and more varied than the world of the Manasā fable, and it is less dark, violent, and primitive. Here is no conflict between god and man,<sup>2</sup> no ruthless Manasā chastising an intransigent Chāḍ, but a benign Chaṇḍi rewarding men and women who willingly follow her. The men and women are all of average build, none of them is cast in the heroic mould like Chāḍ and Bipulā, or is subjected to the same stress. Instead of Manasā's snakes there is the beautiful lizard of a golden hue. The Lady on the Lotus is the high light of the fables, and the Chaṇḍi poets put forth their best efforts to describe her. It is a pity that such a beautiful image should be spoilt by the grotesque act of swallowing and disgorging an elephant.

The name of the poet Baṛu Chaṇḍidās<sup>3</sup> and the hymn he addresses to Chaṇḍi in the *Sri-Kṛiṣṇa-kīrtan* make it certain that the Chaṇḍi cult was current in Bengal in the fifteenth century. We get evidence of this in the description of Nadiyā in Vrindāvan Dās's *Chaitanya-bhāgavat*. It would be safe to assume, however, that the cult originated as a Vrata<sup>4</sup> at an earlier date, and that the nucleus of the fables summarized above was current in the form of a Vrata-kathā<sup>5</sup> long before it assumed its present form about the fifteenth century. It is generally believed that the first poet to write a full-size Chaṇḍi-maṅgal was a contemporary of Baṛu Chaṇḍidās. No trace of his work remains, but it is believed that Mukundarām<sup>6</sup> has this poet in mind when in his Chaṇḍi-maṅgal he talks of the Ādi Kavikaṅkan who was the initiator of Chaṇḍi

<sup>1</sup> Srimanta in some versions.

<sup>2</sup> There is some conflict between Chaṇḍi and Dhanapati, who is a follower of Siva. But it is on a smaller scale than the conflict between Manasā and Chāḍ.

<sup>3</sup> Servant, i.e. worshipper, of Chaṇḍi.

<sup>4</sup> A minor domestic ritual.

<sup>5</sup> Fable attached to a domestic ritual.

<sup>6</sup> See below.

songs (*giter guru*). Mānik Datta, the first ascertained Chandi-poet, flourished in the sixteenth century, possibly earlier. Mādhav Āchārya's poem was written about 1580; it has a reference to the emperor Akbar who conquered Bengal in 1575. It was popular in east Bengal, and its author was probably the same Mādhav Āchārya who wrote a Krisna-maṅgal and a Gaṅgā-maṅgal poem.<sup>1</sup>

Mukundarām Chakravartti is our greatest Chandi-poet. He is also known by the title of Kavikāṅkan, and his *Chandi-maṅgal* was most probably written in the last decade of the sixteenth century; it has a reference to Mān Siṃha who became the subahdar of Bengal in 1594. From the long account Mukundarām has given of himself in his poem we learn that he was a native of Dāmuniyā in Burdwan district, but had to leave his ancestral home under the oppression of the local Pathan governor, Mahmud Sharif. In search of a new home Mukundarām and his family spent many days in poverty and hunger on the roads. One Yadu Kunḍu, a humble oilman of Bheṭnā, offered him hospitality for three days, and it speaks well of Mukundarām that in his prosperity he did not forget to record his gratitude to this benefactor. Eventually he reached the village of Ārṛā in Midnapur district, where the raja Bākuṛā Rāy welcomed him and appointed him tutor to his son Raghunāth. The *Chandi-maṅgal* was written some years later, when Raghunāth had become raja, and under his patronage.

In Mukundarām's hands the Chandi fables assume a life they never had before or since. But Mukundarām is not only our greatest Chandi poet, he is one of our greatest poets. Before him our literature was obsessed with mysticism and allegory, and subsisted on age-worn myths and legends. But Mukundarām brought to it a human and social consciousness that was altogether new, and characters, situations, and incidents that were drawn straight from contemporary life. His modernity is astonishing, and is like a shaft of daylight in the encompassing medieval night. His realistic, even documentary, art is a rare treasure in the prevailing sentimentalism and emotionalism of our poetry. No one before him, and very few after him, had his interest in the actualities of life, or recorded them with such minute fidelity. He is our first humanist and modernist, the first poet who seems to have been aware that man, and man in society, should be a proper theme of poetry. The condition of our literature when he appeared, and

<sup>1</sup> See p. 65.

the contribution he made to it, would be appropriately described in the following words, taken though they are from a poet who could never have imagined their being used in the present context.

Methinks heroic poesie till now  
 Like some fantastic fairy-land did show;  
 Gods, devils, nymphs, witches, and giants' race,  
 And all but man, in man's best work had place.  
 Thou like some worthy knight, with sacred arms,  
 Instead of those, dost man and manners plant,  
 The things which that rich soil did chiefly want.

As a Maṅgal-kāvya Mukundarām's poem is heavily encumbered with mystical, mythical, and supernatural stuff, and much of it is like a fantastic fairy-land; but the chief impression it nevertheless leaves is that of reality, humanity, and modernity. After taking Dhanapati to the Bay of Bengal Mukundarām makes him pass through a sea of lobsters and prawns, then through a sea of crabs, and through successive seas of snakes, crocodiles ('like date-palms afloat on the water'), cowries, and conch-shells, until Ceylon is reached! But we dismiss that bit of fantasy with a good-humoured laugh, and remember Mukundarām's meticulously correct geography as he takes the same hero down the Ajay and the modern Hooghly rivers, past many towns which are still standing, though but ghosts of their former selves. Nor does he omit to mention the Portuguese pirates who at that time were ravaging the eastern coast of India. Many instances can be given to show how up to date and topical Mukundarām generally is, how objective and concrete, and how keenly interested in the social and economic side of life. His work is a mine full of ore of inestimable value to the student of social history. The town of Gujarāt founded by Kālketu grows vividly before our eyes as we read the photographic description of the many people, of different faiths, occupations, customs, and manners, who come to settle there; the loans of money, grain, and cattle they are given; and the rights and privileges they are promised. Bengal of the sixteenth century lives vividly and permanently in passages like this.

Here is a writer in the true classical tradition: one who writes with knowledge, precision of language, and with his eye on the object. In a literature so unknowing and unseeing as ours, and so given to inane generalities, Mukundarām is one of the few writers who are knowledgeable, observant, and specific. Where another

poet would merely have said that his native village groaned under the oppression of the governor, Mukundarām gives the detailed information that fallow lands were assessed as arable, fifteen *kāṭhās* of land were fraudulently measured as a *kurā*,<sup>1</sup> the value of the rupee had fallen by two and a half annas, and the money-lenders had become exacting. He goes on to report that when the peasants began to sell off their grain and cattle there was a glut in the market, and things worth a rupee sold for ten annas. The people would have left the village but were forced to stay, and the talukdar was imprisoned. Could a modern economist have made a better report?

Mukundarām records life as he finds it, without transformation or distortion, and with an adequacy of statement that is very satisfying. It should not be supposed, however, that his concern with actualities restricts him to superficialities; on the contrary, he never misses the opportunity to dive into essentials. His insight into human nature is remarkable, and he has hit off several life-like characters in brief, almost involuntary, touches: Bhāru Datta, the glib and astute rogue, cool and self-assured to the last; Murāri Sil, the grasping old pawnbroker who tries to cheat Kālketu over the price of the ring Chanḍi gave him; and Durbalā, the scheming maid-servant who makes bad blood between Dhanapati's two wives. They are true to type, but are nonetheless individual; they have stepped out of contemporary life, but we can meet them even to-day; they are Bengali first and foremost, yet they have a touch of the universal. Some of them, as for instance Murāri Sil, have been presented in vivid and brisk dramatic sketches. Murāri owed Kālketu some money, so he hides himself in the back room when he sees Kālketu coming. 'Where are you, uncle?' cries Kālketu as he enters the shop. 'I have come on important business.' Murāri's wife comes out and says, 'Your uncle went out in the morning to collect interest from his debtors. The money we owe you will be paid to-morrow. So come to-morrow, and bring some wood and some plums when you come. For that, too, you will be paid to-morrow.' 'I had brought a ring to sell,' says Kālketu, 'but as uncle is out, I shall go to another shop.' A ring means good business, so Murāri immediately comes out with a purse and a pair of scales in his hands. 'Well, well, my nephew is a perfect stranger these days. I cannot say that he treats his old uncle very

<sup>1</sup> The proper measurement is twenty *kāṭhās* for a *kurā*.

kindly, as he never comes to see him.' After weighing the ring he haggles over its price. 'There is no gold or silver in this ring. It looks bright because it is made of bell-metal.' He offers a ridiculously low price, and even that he will not wholly pay in cash. 'Take some in cash, and some in *khud*' (rice-dust). And he twists and wriggles until the proper price is wrenched out of him.

There is a twinkle in Mukundarām's eyes when he describes such scenes, and his wit often has a Shavian flavour. The general of the king of Kalinga is as great a coward within as he is a blusterer without, and is seized with palpitation while he shouts to his soldiers to fight bravely. The doctors of Gujarāt are no good at curing disease, and charge their patients for tapping them on the chest. Even the sight of a flowery meadow inspires our poet to anti-clericalism: 'As the bee after sucking honey from one flower merrily goes into another, so the priest after getting presents from one house enters another.' The royal priest of Siṃhal is a comic figure, and Dhanapati's guests render themselves comical as they wrangle about their social superiority. Mukundarām preserves his characteristic impersonality and detachment in his comic passages, and does not appear to be poking fun. He writes in such a quiet, unobtrusive, almost casual manner as to give the impression that he has no satiric, even ironic, motive. When we laugh we are not aware that he is laughing with us, or that he is there at all.

Even so clear-sighted a writer has his blind spots, even so alert a mind sometimes goes to sleep. Many bad social customs are accepted by Mukundarām not only without demur but with superstitious faith. Such for instance are the ordeals through which Khullanā has to pass to prove her purity. Instead of maintaining an attitude of historical objectivity Mukundarām writes about those ordeals with the enthusiasm of a person who believes in them and is proud to put his heroine through them. His originality as a writer often deserts him in other spheres. Many of his serious and pathetic passages, as for instance those describing Khullanā's unhappiness during her husband's absence, are littered with current conventionalities. The same is true of such romantic passages as those describing Khullanā's longing for her husband on the approach of spring. No one can entirely transcend the limitations of his age, but it is disappointing all the same to find those false notes in a writer who generally rings so true.

How true he rings can be seen from his characterization. His

men and women are none of them angels or monsters, exalted or degraded beyond their normal humanity. They are all average and ordinary, and have a mixture of both good and bad in them. Kālketu is honest, but boorish and simple-minded. He is a mighty hunter, and, when his kingdom is invaded by the king of Kalinga, he fights bravely and wins. But Mukundarām will not invest his hero with false heroics. When the king of Kalinga attacks again, Kālketu realizes the enemy's superior strength and hides himself. That was the only practical course to take, and Mukundarām has no hesitation in making his hero take it. Dhanapati has the characteristic qualities of a wealthy merchant in middle age. Easy-going, self-indulgent, and pleasure-loving, he is eminently attractive at the same time. We are not surprised that he should wish to marry the young and beautiful Khullanā in spite of his being already married to Lahanā, or that he should get Lahanā's consent to the marriage in the way he does. Tradition required Lahanā to be a bad woman, if only to be an effective foil to Khullanā. But Mukundarām represents her as weak rather than wicked, and a tool in the hands of the wily maid-servant Durbalā. Dhanapati has only to say a few nice things to her, and to promise her a few pieces of jewellery, to get her consent to his second marriage. Khullanā retains many of the super-human virtues traditionally belonging to the heroine of a medieval story, but here, too, the realistic hand of Mukundarām has been at work and has presented her as an ordinary woman in many ways. Under Lahanā's persecution Khullanā does not behave like an angel or a patient Griselda, but returns insult for insult, blow for blow. If the good characters are not abnormally good, the bad characters are not abnormally bad. Murāri Sil, Bhāru Datta, and Durbalā may displease us, but they gain full artistic sympathy, and we accept them as no more or no less human than ourselves.

So realistic and human a writer leads us to expect that he will also be democratic, and Mukundarām fulfils that expectation. He was fortunate in having a story whose main characters belonged neither to the aristocracy nor to the higher castes. Dhanapati is wealthy, but of the *vaiśya* caste, and Kālketu is both low-born and poor. The interest Mukundarām takes in low life and the sympathy he shows with the poor are unparalleled in our early literature. The passage in the Kālketu fable where the animals of the forest complain of their misery is but a thinly veiled cry of the oppressed



humanity of Bengal, and the note of poverty is insistent in the Vāramāsi in which Phullarā describes her life through the twelve months of the year.

Mukundarām has sometimes been compared to Chaucer. Both poets are objective and realistic, and have an instinct for comedy which, far from being unkind, is a part of their large and benign humanity. But there the resemblance ends. Mukundarām was a village poet, circumscribed in idea and outlook, while Chaucer was urban and well travelled, better cultivated, and better acquainted with human affairs, and altogether a much greater poet. Mukundarām is more like Langland than Chaucer.

After Mukundarām there was a slump in Chanḍi literature, and his successors were neither many nor distinguished. The seventeenth century saw but one, viz. Dwija Janārdan, whose small poem is of the Vrata-kathā type and omits the Kālketu fable. The poems of Jaynārāyan Sen,<sup>1</sup> Muktarām Sen, Bhavānisaṅkar Dās, and others of the eighteenth century have the size of the Maṅgal-kāvya, but that is all that can be said about them. It is possible that these poets were up against the feeling that after Mukundarām's work there was little left for them to do. It is also possible that they were up against the growing popularity of the other Chanḍi, viz. that of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*. The Mārkaṇḍeya Chanḍi, generally known as Durgā, now provides the occasion for Bengal's greatest religious festival. She received the homage of many poets: e.g. Bhavānīprasād Rāy, Dwija Kamal-lochan, Rupnārāyan Ghos, and Govinda Dās of the seventeenth century; and Siv-chandra Sen, Rāmsaṅkar Dev, Haris-chandra Vasu, Harinārāyan Dās, Jagatrām Vandya, and Rāmprasād Vandya of the eighteenth.

Before we pass on to the literature of the other cults we should notice the versions that were made of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*. As in Tudor England, so in Bengal of the Nadiyā period, the growing strength of the vernacular literature showed itself in two ways: in original compositions and in translations of the classics. Of the many Sanskrit works that engaged the attention of the translators, the most important were, of course, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* and, after them, the *Bhāgavata*.<sup>2</sup> There were so many translations of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* that, even if none of the other Purānas had been

<sup>1</sup> See p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> For the versions of the *Bhāgavata* see p. 65.

translated, we should still have been justified in calling this period the period of purāṇic renaissance.

Of the twenty or so versions of the *Rāmāyana* the most outstanding were those by Adbhut Āchārya, by Saṣṭhivar Sen and his son Gaṅgādās Sen, and by Kavichandra Chakravartti,<sup>1</sup> Sivchandra Sen, and Fakir-rām Kavibhusan. The first is of the seventeenth century, the rest of the eighteenth. Adbhut's real name was Nityānanda, and his work was so popular, particularly in north Bengal, that parts of it have crept into all editions of Krittivās's version. Fakir-rām is specially memorable as the author of the episode entitled 'Āṅgader Rāybār' (Āṅgad's embassy) which he interpolated into his work, and which has since become quite a common feature of the Bengali *Rāmāyanas*.

More than thirty versions were made of the *Mahābhārata*, whether wholly or partly, and the best of them were those by Kāsirām Dās and Nityānanda Ghos of the seventeenth century, and by Kavichandra Chakravartti of the eighteenth. Kāsirām's work is the best Bengali *Mahābhārata* in verse, and it has been almost as popular and influential as Krittivās's *Rāmāyana*. Kāsirām, like Krittivās, is not merely a translator, but one of our greatest early poets. He lived in the village of Siṅgi in Burdwan district and composed his work in the first decade of the seventeenth century. The suggestion that has sometimes been made that he did not live to finish his work, and that its concluding parts were written by his son, does not rest on sure grounds. Nor would it be an unusual blemish in Kāsirām's work if his son did have a hand in it. Very few of these *Rāmāyanas* and *Mahābhāratas* have come down exactly as their authors wrote them, and the interpolators have been most busy with the works, such as those of Krittivās and Kāsirām, which have been the most famous.

These writers retell the main stories of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* in their own way, and they are not, strictly speaking, translators. Fidelity to the original, whether in respect of incident, character, or diction, is no part of their aim, and they add and alter with the utmost freedom. Most of the episodes they interpolate, e.g. those of Srivatsa and Chintā, of Mahirāvan, Bhāsmalochan, and of Āṅgad's embassy and Rām's worship of Durgā, were taken from local life; while a small number, such as the episode of Sitā's exile, were derived from current versions of the epics in languages

<sup>1</sup> See p. 65.

other than Bengali. None of the translators, including Kṛttivās and Kāsirām Dās, has it in his power to communicate the epic dignity and grandeur of their originals, and they wisely keep their works to the level of folk-literature. They succeed eminently on that level, and Kāsirām's *Mahābhārata*, like Kṛttivās's *Rāmāyana*, has found a permanent place in Bengali homes. Their interest is ethical, not literary, and the world they reproduce is not the ancient India of Vālmiki and Vyāsa, but the Bengal of their own day. The characters retain their original names of Rām, Sitā, or Arjjun, but in reality they are Bengali men and women. They retain their original roles of kings, queens, and warriors, but they represent popular and rustic ideals, not the aristocratic ideals of the heroic poem. The lofty and austere virtues of courts and camps have been replaced by soft and sentimental domestic virtues. The heroic note has been softened to the point of extinction in the many devotional passages that have been interpolated, particularly in the recensions of the *Rāmāyana*. The Vaisnavas have been most busy here, claiming Rām as an incarnation of Visnu, and converting the epic into a hymn of Bhakti. Much absurdity has been the result, as when Taranisen and some other *rāksasa* generals kneel down before Rām, and the battlefield becomes a prayer ground.

The opportunity may here be taken to mention the translation of the famous Hindi work, the *Bhaktamāl* of Nābhāji Dās, by Krisnadās Bābāji. This had considerable popularity. Another well-known Hindi poem, viz. the *Padmāvat* by Mālik Muhammad Jayṣi, was presented in a free version by Ālāol.<sup>1</sup> Giridhar's translation of the *Gita Govinda* should also be noted here.

To return to the literature of the *laukik* cults. Among the *laukik* deities Dharma (also called Nirañjan and Sunya Nirañjan) was almost as popular as Manasā and Chāṇḍī, and had a literature almost as large. As already stated, Dharma was an indigenous deity, and originally current in the lower strata of society. Rāmāi Paṇḍit, believed to be the original exponent and priest of the Dharma cult, was of the *ḍom* caste, and most of the later Dharma priests have been equally low-born. Dharma represented the idea of the Buddha in the vulgar and perverted form which that idea took in the post-Mahāyāna days, and the Dharma cult was a hotch-potch of the obscurantist beliefs and practices, such as Tāntric Sahajiyā and Saiva Nāthism, that grew up on the decline of

<sup>1</sup> See p. 83.

Mahāyāna Buddhism. The cult had a jumbled mythology, partly classical and partly its own, and the idea of a primal *sunya* (void) in its cosmogony was probably derived from the popular misconception of the *sunya-vād* (doctrine of impermanence) of Nāgārjuna. The cult may be safely assumed to have been in existence in the tenth century if not earlier, and it was chiefly prevalent in Rāṛh (south-west Bengal), more specifically in the region lying to the south and west of the Dāmodar. Through that region flowed the now extinct Champā, the sacred river of Dharma-worshippers, on whose bank stood the village of Hākanda, believed to be the original centre of the cult. There are references to the Dharma cult in such Bengali works as Vipradās Piplāi's *Manasā-maṅgal* and Mānik Datta's *Chandī-maṅgal*, but none of its own surviving literature seems to be older than the seventeenth or the sixteenth century.

The Dharma literature falls into two classes: (1) manuals of Dharma theology and ritual (Vāramati), and (2) Dharma-maṅgal poems. The most famous of the Vāramati manuals is the recently discovered *Sunya-purān*,<sup>1</sup> parts of which are traditionally ascribed to Rāmāi Paṇḍit. It was pieced together from three manuscripts, and is a heterogenous collection of works, many of them mere fragments, by different authors of different times. The most interesting pieces are a poem on the sun, a poem on Siva as a ploughman, and a poem entitled 'Nirañjaner Usmā' (Wrath of Nirañjan). The last is from a mid-eighteenth-century work, viz. the *Anil-purān*, by Sahadev Chakravartti.<sup>2</sup> On its first appearance the *Sunya-purān* was over-enthusiastically received as a very early work, and was even placed in the tenth century. Parts of it may have been originally written as early as that, but in its present form it contains nothing that on linguistic evidence can be considered earlier than the sixteenth century.

The Dharma-maṅgal poems glorify Dharma by relating the exploits which his devotee Lāusen was able to perform by his grace. The exploits are as numerous as they are superhuman and miraculous, and only a brief summary of the Dharma fable will be given here. Karnasen of Maynāgaṛ was a feudatory king under the emperor of Gauṛ. When Ichhāi Ghos of Dhekurgar, another feudatory king, rebelled against the emperor, Karnasen sent his

<sup>1</sup> Discovered by Haraprasād Sāstri, and edited by Nagendranāth Vasu in 1908. The title was supplied by the editor.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 79.

six sons to quell the rebellion. The sons were killed, and Karnasen's wife died in grief for them. In appreciation of his loyalty, and in sympathy for his bereavements, the emperor gave Karnasen his sister-in-law, the young and beautiful Rañjāvati, in marriage. Rañjāvati's brother Mahāmad<sup>1</sup> was the emperor's prime minister, and he was bitterly opposed to the marriage, for the reason, among others, that Karnasen was an old man. Rañjāvati was a devotee of Dharma, and by his grace she bore her old husband a son who was called Lāusen. Mahāmad's opposition to his sister's marriage now took the form of hatred for his nephew, and he made several attempts to kill him. But Dharma protected the boy, who on attaining manhood set out for Gauṛ to present himself before the emperor. On the way Lāusen fought a tiger and a crocodile, and he was commended and rewarded by the emperor for the feats of valour he performed before him at Gauṛ. Then his trials began, all engineered by the hateful uncle. He was ordered to lead three dangerous expeditions: against the king of Kāmrup, against Kānaṛā, the princess of Simul, and against Ichhāi Ghos of Dhekurgar; and was successful in all. Then came impossible tasks: to arrest the rain and the flood that were about to destroy Gauṛ, and to show that the sun rose in the west; but nothing was impossible for so great a devotee of Dharma to perform. In Lāusen's absence Mahāmad invaded Maynāgaṛ, and Kālu Ḍom and Lakhiyā, Lāusen's friends, and Kaliṅgā, one of Lāusen's wives, were killed in its defence. Another friend of Lāusen, the truthful Harihar Bāiti, who had witnessed the sunrise in the west, was impaled by Mahāmad. But Dharma restored them to life, and thenceforward Lāusen reigned happily in Maynāgaṛ.

The Dharma fable is crowded with incidents, but gains unity from the pervading personality of Lāusen. Some of the incidents are reminiscent of the life of Krisna. Places and buildings still exist in Rāṛh for which tradition claims connexion with Lāusen and Ichhāi Ghos, but there are no good reasons for believing, as many do, that the core of the Dharma fable is historical. Not only was the Dharma cult mainly prevalent in Rāṛh, but almost all its poets came from that region. Because of this local character the Dharma-maṅgal may be called the epic of Rāṛh. The poets exhibit a common characteristic which is quite pleasing; almost all of them talk at length about themselves and the circumstances

<sup>1</sup> Also appears as Māhudyā.

connected with the composition of their poems. The personal accounts given by Ruprām and Mānikrām Gāṅguli are the best things in their works.

So far as is known, Khelārām and Mayur Bhaṭṭa were the earliest Dharma poets. Their works have perished, but they survive in references made about them by the later poets. Mayur Bhaṭṭa, in particular, is mentioned as the original poet (*ādi kavi*) of the Dharma cult. There has been a lot of speculation about his date, but it has proved futile in the absence of his work. The earliest extant Dharma-maṅgals are those by Sitārām Dās and Syām Paṇḍit, both written towards the end of the seventeenth century. The poem by Ruprām probably belongs to the same date. The other Dharma poets, about ten in all, belong to the eighteenth century. The greatest is Ghanarām Chakravartti,<sup>1</sup> a native of Krisnapur near Burdwan, and a protégé of Kirttichandra, the local raja. Ghanarām's work, somewhat formidable in size, was finished in 1711. The Dharma poets as a class do not strike a high level, but Ghanarām is vivid and clear, and would have been more enjoyable had he not been so fond of alliteration as he is. Mānikrām Gāṅguli has never been so popular as Ghanarām, but he has some special features, including a sense of humour uncommon in these poets. The *Anil-purān* by Sahadev Chakravartti is a medley, and is not to be regarded as a Dharma-maṅgal proper. It contains several things bearing on the Dharma cult, but not the Lāusen fable. The aforementioned piece entitled 'Nirañjaner Usmā'<sup>2</sup> describes how in the Jājpur area of south Rāṅh fanatical Muhammadan fakirs oppressed Hindu villagers with the assistance of Dharma-worshippers. With queer humour Sahadev represents the oppressors as Hindu deities who had been incarnated as Muslims in order to punish Brahmans for their oppression of Dharma-worshippers. The *Anil-purān* also contains matter bearing on the Nāth and Siva cults.

The opportunity may be taken here to mention three Maṅgal poems on Jagannāth of Puri. The authors were: Gadādhara,<sup>3</sup> Viśwambhar Dās, and Dwija Madhukanṭha. The first belonged to the seventeenth century, the others to the eighteenth.

The poems on Jagannāth were of local interest, but the Sivāyan

<sup>1</sup> Also wrote a poem on Satya-Pir (see p. 86).

<sup>2</sup> See p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> A brother of Kāsirām Dās (see p. 75).

poems in honour of Siva had wide currency. The Siva of Bengali folk-lore is very much a rustic, made by rustics in their own image, and shorn of the cosmic and philosophic qualities of his classical prototype. He tills the soil instead of dancing the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. He is no longer the noumenon, the abstract and abiding principle in the concrete world of transitory phenomena, but an old Silenus keeping low company and running after low women. From the great mythological god who swallowed poison to save the universe from destruction he has now degenerated into a drug-addict. Nor does he retain, except very vaguely, the qualities of the Buddha with whom he had become partly identified. While that princely mendicant had renounced the world in search of a truth that would save humanity, the Siva of Bengali folk-songs is a vagabond who would beg rather than work, and who has no sense of social responsibility.

But the Siva of the Sivāyan poems we are about to consider is not altogether the country clod described above. With the purānic renaissance of the fifteenth century and after he regained some of his finer qualities and something of his old classical grandeur. The poets who wrote about him after the renaissance were men of some culture, and the people for whom they wrote were largely of the middle class. As the vernacular language and literature became refined from the fifteenth century onwards by contact with the classical language and literature, so did the rustic deities become refined by gaining access to the higher strata of society. Thus it is that the Siva of the Sivāyan poems is the head of a middle-class family rather than a ploughman tilling the soil. He performs the duties of a husband and a father quite well, and if he sometimes goes off the rails (as when his wife tempts him in the disguise of a low *bāgdi* woman), it is because the old offending Adam has not been completely cast out of him. One of his most pleasant functions in the Sivāyan poems is to provide innocent fun as the old husband of a young wife. This is a stock subject, but it had a particular point in the social custom of the age.

The middle-class influence also shows itself in the prominence which Siva's wife Durgā<sup>1</sup> gets in these poems. Quite often she steals the main interest. She represents the ideal wife and mother, and is to this day the most popular Bengali goddess. She is also the symbol of the beloved young daughter sundered by marriage

<sup>1</sup> Also known as Umā, Pārvati, Gauri, and Saṅkari.

from her parents' bosom. The Āgamani songs in which Durgā's mother Menakā mourns her separation from her daughter, and rejoices at the prospect of her daughter's return, are the most touching things in Bengali folk-literature, and they never fail to draw tears from the women hearing them. Āgamani means 'advent', and the Āgamani songs are sung for a fortnight before the festival known as Durgā Pujā. The Durgā Pujā is Bengal's greatest religious festival, and it celebrates the annual visit that Durgā, somewhat like Persephone, pays her parents. She comes in the season of Sarat when the skies are washed with rain and the fields are overflowing with corn, and after staying with her parents for three days she returns to her husband's home on Mount Kailās.

The Siva songs, like the songs of the other *laukik* deities, were orally current long before they were put into writing. Many of their topics, e.g. Siva as a ploughman, his marriage, and his domestic life, are found in the *Sunya-purān*,<sup>1</sup> and in some of the Rāmāyanas, Manasā-maṅgals, and Chāṇḍi-maṅgals of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> There are more such topics in the *Kālikā-purān* by Nārāyan Dev.<sup>3</sup> But the earliest Sivāyan poems proper were written by Kavichandra Chakravartti<sup>4</sup> and Dwija Ratidev in the seventeenth century. Dwija Ratidev's work was called *Mriga-lubdha*. A few more followed in the eighteenth century, when Rāmeswar Bhaṭṭāchārya<sup>5</sup> wrote what remains the best Sivāyan in our language. Rāmeswar's poem is sometimes called *Siva-saṁkirtan*, and its homely but heartfelt language is well suited to the simple joys and sorrows it describes.

In a land where the tiger and the snake are the most dangerous animals, we should expect to have a tiger-god in addition to Manasā the snake-goddess. Dakṣin Rāy, the tiger-god, is still worshipped in the Sundarban region, but it seems that his cult was localized there, and that he had only one, and an unfinished, poem written in his honour. Nor is that poem all about him, as it contains the incidental fables of his rival, the Pir Baṛa Khā Ghāzi, and of Kālurāy the local crocodile-god. The poem is the *Rāy-maṅgal* by Krisnarām Dās, who also wrote a *Kālikā-maṅgal* and a *Vrata-kathā* on Saṣṭhi, the protective deity of children.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> As in Vijay Gupta's and Mukundarām Chakravartti's works.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 65-6.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Also wrote a *pāchālī* song on Satya-Pir (see p. 86).



Krisnarām mentions an earlier work on Daksin Rāy by Mādhav Āchārya, but that is all that is known of that work. He shows originality in the choice of his theme, though in parts it reminds one of the Chanḍi fable. The main story is about the rivalry that sprang up between Daksin Rāy, a Hindu deity, and Baṛa Khā Ghāzi, a Muslim Pir, because merchants going out on sea-voyages used to worship Daksin Rāy, but not Baṛa Khā. An armed conflict followed, in which the tiger armies belonging to the rivals were engaged, and which nearly brought the world to an end. To save the world God came down in a form that was half Krisna and half Muhammad, and reconciled the rivals. Primitive and simple-minded though the *Rāy-maṅgal* is, it nevertheless is interesting for its sociological implication. The synthesis it makes between Hinduism and Islam was characteristic of the seventeenth century, and moulded many social customs and religious observances of the two communities. The synthesis was most conspicuous in the cultural sphere, and it gave birth to such popular cults as those of Satya-Pir and Mānik-Pir to be noticed later.

This leads us to consideration of the Muslim poets of this period, though there is no reason for segregating them from the Hindu poets. They belong fully to the national tradition, writing primarily as Bengali poets, and only secondarily as Muslims. Apart from a larger admixture of Persian and Arabic words in their vocabulary, they write in as sanskritized a style as their Hindu compeers. They take themes, modes, images, and ideas from Sanskrit as unhesitatingly as the Hindu poets do, and they accept Hindu mythology, and write on Hindu deities, with as much enthusiasm and reverence as any Hindu could have done. As illustration of this may be cited the Pads on Krisna and Rādhā by Nāsir Mahmud, Saiyad Marttuzā, Saiyad Sultān,<sup>1</sup> Āli Rājā,<sup>2</sup> Ālāol, and others of the seventeenth century. The contributions made by Daulat Kāzi and Sekh Fayzullā to Nāth literature, and by Saiyad Zāfar to Kālī literature, may also be cited in this connexion. It should not be supposed, however, that the Muhammadan writers have ceased to be Muhammadan or that there is nothing Islamic in their work. On the contrary they enlarge the content of Bengali literature with the Islamic ideas they express and the themes they introduce from Arabic and Persian sources.

<sup>1</sup> For his other works see p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Also wrote *Jñān-sāgar*, *Dhyān-mālā*, and other poems.

Among the most interesting things they import from abroad are some tales, akin to the Arabian Nights, such as those of Hātem-tāi, Leilā-Majnun, and Yusuf-Zulekhā. Those tales originated in the Near East, and they came to Bengal with the Arab settlers in Chittagong and Ārākān. The royal court of Ārākān, modelled on the court of the Pathan sultans of Bengal, gave patronage to several of our Muslim poets, most notably Ālāol. The aforementioned tales, as well as those of Hānif, Āmir Hāmzā, and Sonābhan,<sup>1</sup> were very popular, particularly in east Bengal.

Ālāol was the son of the prime minister of Jālālpur in east Bengal. After his father had been killed by Portuguese pirates, and he had himself narrowly escaped death, the young Ālāol arrived in Ārākān. There he received the patronage of Māgan Thākur, the prime minister, but ill fortune dogged him. His patron died, and he was imprisoned on a false charge of conspiracy. Ālāol wrote several long poems, most of which were based on Persian originals: *Saiful-mulk*, *Hapta Paykar*, *Tohfā*, *Badiuj-jamāl*, and *Sikandar-nāmā*. His fame as one of the foremost Bengali poets of the seventeenth century chiefly rests on his *Pads* and on the *Padmāvati*. The last was based on a Hindi poem by Mālik Muhammad Jaysi<sup>2</sup> on the well-known story of the love of Ālāuddin Khilji, emperor of Delhi, for Padmāvati, the queen of Chitor. Ālāol's poem is not really a translation, but an original work in all essential aspects. Both in this and in his other poems Ālāol displays a Sanskrit scholarship which would do credit to a Sanskrit pandit, and his knowledge of Hindu customs, and his insight into Hindu character, would be astonishing even in a Hindu writer. His chief fault is that he gets involved in abstruse metaphysical ideas. He writes in a highly sanskritized style which makes him the pioneer of the neo-classicism perfected by Bhārat-chandra Rāy in the eighteenth century.

Saiyad Sultān, a native of Parāgalpur in Chittagong district, wrote several poems, e.g. *Ĵñān-pradiṇ*, *Sabe-meyārāz*, and *Nabi-vaṃsa*. The last, the most notable of them, is another instance of the synthesis that was going on in that age between Hinduism and Islam. Saiyad Sultan has included some Hindu deities among the twelve *nabis* or great persons whose account he gives in the poem. Some of the other writers of the seventeenth century can only be

<sup>1</sup> These tales are sometimes supposed to have come from the north-western parts of India.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 76.

mentioned by name: Daulat Kāzi, the oldest of the Ārākan poets, and the author of *Sati Maynāmāti*,<sup>1</sup> Sekh Chād, author of *Rasul-vijay*; Muhammad Khān, author of *Maqtul-Husain* and other poems; Sāh Muhammad Sagir, author of *Yusuf-Zulekhā*; and Ābdul Nabī, author of *Āmir Hāmsā*. The most notable Muslim poet of the eighteenth century was Hāyāl Māhmud, the author of several works including *Chitta Utthān*, a version of the Sanskrit *Hitopadesa* through Persian.

The consideration of the Nāth literature has been postponed for the reason that none of its extant specimens seems to be earlier than the eighteenth century. The cult itself is supposed to have been in existence from the tenth century or so, and some of its literature is supposed to have circulated through itinerant minstrels from the same date. It is a very difficult cult to describe, being more esoteric and obscurantist than any of the other cults we have noticed; but it seems to have had as object the attainment of occult powers by the practice of Haṭha Yoga (mental concentration accompanied by gymnastic postures of the body). It was a Saivaite cult, mixed with Tantrism and debased Buddhism, and riotous with mystery, magic, and *mantra* (charm). Its four chief saints, or *siddhās* as they were called, were Minanāth (also called Matsyendranāth), the founder of the cult, and Goraksanāth, Hāripā, and Kānupā. The followers mostly came from the lower classes, and were called Yogis or Yugis. The cult is believed to have originated in Bengal, but its present followers are mostly found in other parts of India.

The Nāth literature consists of two fables, both glorifying the Nāth saints by displaying their miraculous powers. One is the fable of Minanāth and his disciple Goraksanāth, the other is the fable of Maynāmāti and her son Govindachandra. Hāripā is the saint whose miraculous powers are displayed in the Maynāmāti-Govindachandra fable. The fable of Minanāth and Goraksanāth is the subject of several poems entitled *Mina-chetan* and *Goraksa-vijay* by Kavindra Dās, Sekh Fayzullā, and others. Sekh Fayzullā is the most important of these poets. Minanāth acquired the *mahā-jñān* (supreme knowledge) by overhearing, in the form of a fish, a profound spiritual discourse that Siva was once having with his wife Gauri. But Gauri put a curse on Minanāth for having sensual thoughts about her, and Minanāth forgot

<sup>1</sup> Also called *Lor-chandrāni*, and completed by Ālāol.

the *mahā-jñān* and lived a life of sensual pleasure in Kadali Pāṭan, a town inhabited only by women. His devoted disciple Gorakṣa-nāth followed him there in the guise of a dancing girl and rescued him.

There are several poems on the fable of Maynāmati and Govindachandra (also called Gopichandra). The oldest is by Durlabh Mallik, who lived in west Bengal, probably in the eighteenth century. The poems by Bhavāni Dās and Sukur Māmud, both of east Bengal, were probably written in the nineteenth century. In 1878 Sir George Grierson published one which he had collected from village singers in north Bengal. Maynāmati, the widow of Rājā Mānik-chandra, was a follower of the Nāth saint Hāripā, and she prevailed upon her son, the young prince Govindachandra, to become his disciple. Hāripā ordered Govindachandra to renounce the world, and to live the life of a *sannyāsi* (monk) for twelve years. After having been subjected to many trials and temptations Govindachandra was permitted to resume his worldly life. At least two places, one near Rangpur in north Bengal and another near Tipperah in east Bengal, still claim to possess the ruins of Maynāmati's palace, and scholars have been busy with the historical aspect of the fable. But even if there were some historical truth in the kernel of the fable, it is now impossible to disentangle it from the fiction which has accumulated around it through the centuries. The touching story of Govindachandra's renunciation travelled far outside Bengal, and is still sung by mendicant minstrels in north-western and western India. But in the land of its origin it is only heard in the north.

The happier days that had begun in Bengal after the Mogul conquest, particularly after Mān Siṃha had become the subahdar (governor), continued into the eighteenth century. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the subahdars of Bengal gave no more allegiance to Delhi than the remittance of an annual revenue. The improved economic condition of the people, and the greater religious freedom enjoyed by the Hindus, were shown in many ways. The renaissance of Hinduism reached its peak in the first half of the eighteenth century, and there was greater literary activity than in the previous centuries. New works appeared on the traditional themes, such as those of Manasā and Chandi, and new translations were made of the classical Purānas. These have been noticed in the preceding pages. We now proceed to the consideration of the

poems that appeared for the first time in the eighteenth century on a number of minor and local deities.

The majority of these poems were of the Vrata-kathā type, but some were Maṅgal-kāvya. There were several on Lakṣmi, the goddess of wealth, and the best of those was the *Kamalā-maṅgal* by Dwija Dhanañjay. Saraswati, the goddess of learning, was glorified by Dayārām and Dwija Vireswar, and Surya, the sun-god, was glorified by Rāmjivan and Dwija Kālidās. Of the many poets who wrote on Gaṅgā, the goddess of the Ganges, Durgā-prasād Mukhuṭi was the best. The subject of the Gaṅgā poems was the purāṇic one of the descent of that goddess on earth in answer to the prayer of Bhagirath. A host of local gods, e.g. Vaidyanāth, Madanmohan, and Tāraknāth, had poems to glorify them, as did Sitalā, the goddess of small-pox. There was no limit, it would seem, to the god-making activity of those days. Nor do the gods and goddesses seem, from the literary quality of the poems they received, to have been difficult to please.

The *pāchālī* poems on Satya-Pir deserve special consideration as further evidence of the synthesis of Hinduism and Islam which, as we have already stated, was taking place in that age. Satya (i.e. Viṣṇu) represents the Hindu part, and Pir represents the Muslim part, of this synthetic deity who is a unique product of Bengal. He originated in the Rārḥ region in the early years of the eighteenth century, and he still retains the all-Bengal vogue he acquired. He is the only one among the *laukik* deities at whose worship the original custom, common to all *laukik* cults, of chanting the fable, is still observed. The Satya-Pir poems were all of the Vrata-kathā type, and of the ten or so that were produced in the eighteenth century those by Rāmeswar Bhaṭṭāchārya<sup>1</sup> and Jaynārāyan Sen<sup>2</sup> were the best. The cult must have been very popular for Bhārat-chandra Rāy<sup>3</sup> to have written two poems on it.

Very similar to the Satya-Pir poems, but inferior in literary quality, were the poems on Trailakya-Pir and Mānik-Pir. These and the songs on Ghāzi Sāheb can still be heard in the villages, among the Muslim population in particular. Of the songs current in the villages the best were the Bāul and the Bhāṭiyāli, and these often struck a spiritual note though they were not attached to any particular religious cults. The Bāuls were a sect of ascetics 'mad with the love of God', who wandered about singing of the transi-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 90.

toriness of worldly life. Their songs have captured many hearts with their world-weariness and spiritual nostalgia, and so have the Bhāṭiyāli or Boatman's songs with their invocation of God as the ferryman who ferries human souls across the river of life. There has been a revival of interest in these songs in modern times, and their tunes have been much in demand with Rabindranath Tagore and his successors. The Tarjā and Kaviwālā songs rose towards the middle of the eighteenth century and remained very popular to the middle of the following century. Like the contemporary Kheūr, Ākhṛāi, and Hāp Ākhṛāi they were rather low forms of literary entertainment, and their popularity reflects the decline of taste, and of cultural life generally, that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Kaviwālās got the name of *dārā kavi* from their customary practice of extemporizing their songs while standing in front of their audience. They were organized in bands often in rivalry with one another, and the attacks and counter-attacks of the leaders of the bands produced many sallies of quick-firing, impromptu wit, and, of course, much scurrility. As wit-combats the Kaviwālā songs have a certain resemblance to the Scots flyting. The most popular Kaviwālās were Raghu Muchi, Haru Ṭhākūr, Rām Vasu, and Antony. The last was a Portuguese merchant who had settled in Bengal and had completely 'gone native'.

If the Kaviwālā and the other songs aforementioned struck a popular, even a vulgar, note, the songs of Rāmnidhi Gupta, commonly known as Nidhu Bābu, belonged to the drawing-rooms of the aristocracy and the gentry. They were elegant and refined, and their Kheyāl and Ṭappā modes came from outside Bengal. Although somewhat artificial in sentiment, they have the great merit of being secular. Before them we had no love-poems or songs, whether of Krisna and Rādhā or of Vidyā and Sundar,<sup>1</sup> which were entirely free of religious association. Nidhu Bābu is our first pure love-lyrist, the precursor of the pure love-lyrists of the nineteenth century.

The greatest song-writer of the eighteenth century was Rām-prasād Sen, a native of Kumārhaṭṭa near Hālisahar, and decorated Kavirañjan by Mahārājā Krisnachandra of Nadiyā. His devotional fervour has assured him of almost unflagging popularity to the present day. He invented a tune which bears his name, and his

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 88-90.

songs were addressed to the goddess Kālī of whom he was a worshipper. Kālī is a Sakti like Manasā and Chandi, and her cult is ancient and non-aryan in origin. She is the destructive principle in nature personified in a black and naked woman of fierce aspect, armed with a sword, garlanded with skulls, and dancing a cosmic war-dance. Her cult had many gross and cruel practices, but it became reformed and humanized under the influence of Vaisnavism. A strong element of Bhakti entered into it, and the former death-dealing goddess became the universal mother protecting and blessing humanity. This was the goddess of whose loving-kindness Rāmprasād sang in such simple and moving tones as have placed him among our greatest devotional poets.

Why are you so anxious, my mind?

Utter Kālī's name, and sit in meditation.

From the pomp of worship pride grows.

Worship her in secret, that none may know.

What would you gain from images of metal, stone or earth? Fashion her image with the stuff of mind, and set it on the lotus-throne of your heart.

How vain are the offerings of parched rice and ripe plantain! Feed her with the nectar of devotion, and satisfy your own mind.

Why seek to illumine her with lamp and lantern and candle? Light the jewelled lamp of the mind, let it flash its lustre day and night.

Why bring sheep and goats and buffaloes for sacrifice? Saying 'Glory to Kālī', sacrifice the Six Passions.

Prasād says: What need is there of drums and tympani? Saying 'Glory to Kālī', clap your hands and lay your mind at her feet.<sup>1</sup>

Rāmprasād wrote a long poem entitled *Kālikā-maṅgal* or *Vidyā-Sundar*, but it has been eclipsed by the poem with the same theme by Bhārat-chandra Rāy.

After Rāmprasād, and mostly in imitation of him, many songs of Kālī were written by Rāmdulāl, Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭāchārya, and others. But the Vidyā-Sundar story was the craze of the century, and claimed the attention of many writers, the most notable of whom were Bhārat-chandra Rāy and Rāmprasād Sen. It is an old story of romantic love, but the Bengali writers treated it realistically, even to the extent of foisting many indelicacies onto it. For this the taste of the upper classes, for whose enjoyment they wrote, was mainly responsible. Rāmprasād and Bhārat-

<sup>1</sup> Based on the translation by E. J. Thompson and A. M. Spencer in *Bengali Religious Lyrics, Sāktā*.

chandra wrote under the patronage of Mahārājā Krisnachandra of Nadiyā, and Krisnachandra's court was typical of the outer elegance and inner corruption of the aristocracy of the age. The second half of the eighteenth century was one of the most chaotic ages in Indian history, with the Mogul empire disintegrating and the British empire not yet founded. The country was ravaged by foreign and native adventurers whose greed and rapacity knew no bounds, and who stopped short of nothing, however despicable, to gain their ends. Mahārājā Krisnachandra was a generous patron of poets and scholars, but he had risen to power by the most unscrupulous means, and was one of the conspirators who brought about the loss of his country's freedom at the Battle of Plassey.

The original Vidyā-Sundar story came from Sanskrit, and scholars have noticed some Persian influence in the way the Bengali poets handled it. Persian influence on the courtly and polite circles of Bengal had increased since the Mogul conquest, and Bhārat-chandra, it will be remembered, was a good Persian scholar. The story is that of a love-intrigue between a princess named Vidyā and a foreign prince in disguise named Sundar. The lovers employ, as a go-between, a woman<sup>1</sup> who supplies flowers to the royal household, and they meet secretly in Vidyā's chamber until, she being with child, they are discovered. Sundar is condemned to death, but is saved by the goddess Kālī whose votary he is. In the end Sundar's identity is revealed, and Vidyā's father happily accepts him as his son-in-law. In the original Sanskrit the story was entirely secular, and had nothing to do with Kālī or any other deity, as *deus ex machina* or anything else. The Kālī element in the Bengali versions, gratuitously and clumsily introduced into a perfectly good plot, shows the harmful effect the religious obsession had on our early literature. Every poem had to be associated with some god or goddess, no matter how irrelevantly or inartistically. Even if the plot of the Vidyā-Sundar story required some deity to come to the help of the lovers in the end, Kālī, who is commonly regarded as the goddess of destruction, was the least suitable for the purpose. Needless to say after this that the Vidyā-Sundar poems formed no part of the Kālī cult.

<sup>1</sup> Bhārat-chandra calls her Hirā. His Vidyā is the princess of Burdwan, and his Sundar, who is the prince of Kāñchi, digs a tunnel from his room in Hirā's house to Vidyā's chamber in the royal palace. Sundar does this with an instrument given by Kālī.



They were not written with the primary object of glorifying Kālī and of spreading her vogue, nor were they meant to be sung or recited as part of the Kālī ritual. That they were not written expressly for a particular cult puts them in a different category from the Maṅgal poems on Manasā, Chāṇḍī, Dharma, and the other *laukik* deities noticed by us. They cannot strictly be classed as Maṅgal poems in spite of the fact that their authors so describe them.

The Vidyā-Sundar story owes its immortality to the genius of Bhārat-chandra Rāy (1712-60). The son of a wealthy zemindar of Bhursuṭ in Hooghly district, Bhārat-chandra, nevertheless, passed through many vicissitudes in his early life. His paternal property was seized, and he was for some time imprisoned, by the Mahārājā of Burdwan. Happy days began, however, when his verses attracted the attention of Mahārājā Krisnachandra of Nadiyā. Krisnachandra made him his court-poet and granted him a pension and the title of Gunākar. The poet showed his gratitude by commemorating Bhavānanda Majumdār, an ancestor of his patron, in his greatest work. This was the *Kālikā-maṅgal*,<sup>1</sup> a loosely strung collection of three long and virtually separate poems, viz. the *Annadā-maṅgal*, the *Vidyā-Sundar*, and the *Mān-simha*. The trilogy was completed in 1752, and *Vidyā-Sundar* is the best piece in it.

There is some historical matter in these poems, but more that is legendary and mythical, and the poet has not always succeeded in artistically fusing fact and fiction. That is why we are often unable to suspend our disbelief, as in the scene where the attendant spirits of the goddess Annadā perform many supernatural acts before the emperor of Delhi. But then we do not look for historical or romantic imagination in Bhārat-chandra; we look for the realism that is the essential thing in his art. He is at his best when he keeps close to the actualities of life, and in that respect he is akin to Mukundarām Chakravartti, whose influence he shows in more ways than one. The *Kālikā-maṅgal* has incidents, situations and characters which are obviously borrowed from the *Chāṇḍī-maṅgal*, and passages which show the younger poet's deliberate emulation of the older. The double-meaning passage in which Annadā gives an account of herself to Iswar the ferryman is almost a transcript of the double-meaning passage in which Chāṇḍī gives an account

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes called *Annadā-maṅgal* after the first poem in the trilogy.

of herself to Phullarā. The Chautisa<sup>1</sup> in which Sundar prays to Kālī has many echoes of the Chautisa in which Sripati prays to Chandī. But Bhārat-chandra is nothing if not a highly original writer, and these and other borrowings do not really impair his originality. Whatever he takes he transmutes in the crucible of his genius, and his dissimilarities with Mukundarām are deeper than his similarities. He has the social consciousness and intellectual detachment of the old master, but not the objectivity and humanity. Mukundarām presents his characters as they are, effacing himself behind them like a dramatist; Bhārat-chandra leads his by a string like puppets, allowing them no independent life. Mukundarām presents the whole, the sum that human nature is of qualities both good and bad, admirable and laughable; Bhārat-chandra has little spiritual insight, and presents only a part, the quality that is laughable. He sees less than Mukundarām, but not less clearly; his is the bright, though partial and unintegrated, vision of the pure intellect. He is the pure spirit of laughter, an irresponsible and irrepressible Puck for ever exclaiming 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!'

*Vidyā-Sundar* is a love-poem, but the spirit that informs it is that of free comedy. Irresponsible and artificial, witty and elegant, scintillating in every word and phrase, it is a first-rate comedy of manners. The author laughs at high society, but not in a corrective or reforming spirit, and has no morals to inculcate, no norms to uphold. He is moved by the spirit of pure fun, and his whole object is to amuse and entertain. He plays with everyone and everything, with gods and men and with love and sorrow, and he takes nothing seriously except his art. His work is a palace of art decked with many gems, but life and nature do not dwell there.

Bhārat-chandra's sharp intellect shines through every page of his work, and the classicist character of his genius is everywhere in evidence. More even than Mukundarām does he represent the birth of the secular and rational spirit in our literature. There is nothing vague or shadowy about his poetry, it is as brilliant as it is transparent. His attitude towards the gods and goddesses can be irreverent, as for instance in the oblique glances he casts at Siva and Gauri in the *Annadā-maṅgal*. Nor is Kālī over-reverentially

<sup>1</sup> The Chautisa (literally meaning thirty-four) was quite a common form. It was a prayer composed in words beginning with the thirty-four letters of the alphabet. The larger the number of words beginning with the same letter, the greater the skill of the writer. Supposed to have mystical significance, the Chautisa was really a bag of verbal tricks.

treated in *Vidyā-Sundar*. Love, as he depicts it in the latter poem, has nothing ideal, spiritual, or mystical about it; it is, on the contrary, very much the common earthly passion. If it blossoms into some of the finest lyrics the Bengali language could ever have produced, it also lends itself to a frankly realistic treatment. Bhārat-chandra has been taken to task for the realistic passages in *Vidyā-Sundar*, but the very nature of love, at once the source of the world's crudest jokes and its finest poetry, would provide his justification. Further justification, if necessary, would be found in the classical poetry of India and other countries. The Sringāra Rasa of Sanskrit aesthetics conceived of love as a thing of natural, physical delight, and Bhārat-chandra is strictly in the classical Indian tradition in having the same conception. To add to this delight of nature the delights of their art was the happy task the classical Indian poets had set themselves, and Bhārat-chandra follows their footsteps in setting himself the same task. If there is nothing spiritual, or even deeply emotional, in the love of Vidyā and Sundar, there is also no gloating or morbidity; their carnality is frank and full-blooded, like that of two healthy animals, and is most artistically conveyed. The Vaisnava Pad-writers come to the mind in this connexion, particularly as it has been customary to compare Bhārat-chandra unfavourably with them. But his dry and rational treatment of love is a welcome antidote to their mushy sentimentality and spiritual intoxication. Love is not always the all-absorbing grand passion, the supreme mystical reality, the Pad-writers represent it to be. Love for them was the equivalent of religion, if not religion itself, and it often became absurd and unreal because of the hyper-seriousness and over-intensity they put into it. That is why it was necessary and salutary, after nearly two centuries of Vaisnava poetry, to have a poet who brings love down to earth, plays with it, and even laughs at it. We may go farther and say that love comes of age in Bhārat-chandra's hands and develops an adult and civilized consciousness. The Rādhā of the Vaisnava Pads is an adolescent girl (*kīśorī*) with no other quality than that of total absorption in feeling; her lover is a cow-herd; and their union takes place amidst the trees and flowers, peacocks and cattle, and under the lowering sky, on the bank of the Yamunā. Bhārat-chandra's Vidyā is a princess; her lover is a prince; and they bring to their union in Vidyā's chamber in the royal palace the elegances and refinements of two adult and highly cultured minds. Sundar

is a poet and a scholar, and Vidyā is his match in the arts both of learning and love. The background of the older story is rustic, while the background of the later story is courtly. The older poets have more feeling, the younger poet has greater artistry.

Bhārat-chandra's highly developed critical intellect is not an unmixed blessing, for the ugliness it reveals to him often spoils his cool spirit of fun. Lacking the moral fervour that makes a proper satirist, he then becomes a mere scoffer, an *enfant terrible* trying to shock people with wilful naughtiness. Love as then treated by him loses its healthy and full-blooded carnality, and becomes erotic sensationalism. His wit turns salacious, his laughter becomes cynical, and his unmorality verges on immorality. It is this Bhārat-chandra, ingenious, wanton, perverse, and blasé, who disconcerted the solemn fathers and husbands of the nineteenth century, and continues to make many a reader of to-day feel uncomfortably squeamish. Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, found him guilty of grave offence against society. Remembering the tunnel dug by Sundar to gain access into Vidyā's chamber, Rabindranath makes the remark<sup>1</sup> that Bhārat-chandra's poem is a tunnel dug by the author to undermine society. To make a remark like this is to play right into Bhārat-chandra's hands, for there can be no doubt that in his perverse moods he would have enjoyed nothing more than to be misunderstood. We, on our part, never find him shocking, though we sometimes find him boring, and we take him least seriously when he blazes the trail of social unconventionality. He is so transparently a *poseur* then, so patently the school-boy giving himself the airs of a man living dangerously. We never forget that he is essentially a playboy, born to play with life, but with a touch so sure and deft, and with movements so rhythmically perfect, as to be a perpetual delight to watch. To call him an enemy of society is to credit him with a seriousness and responsibility he does not possess, and to lose sight of his essential Puck-like quality. It has, besides, been too easily forgotten that Bhārat-chandra's poem is based on an old Sanskrit story, and that the only question one is entitled to ask is whether his Vidyā and Sundar observe the proprieties of the society to which they originally belonged. The answer to that question is not only that they observe all those proprieties, but that there is nothing in their behaviour which can be regarded as improper even according to the altered standards

<sup>1</sup> In *Grāmya Sāhitya*.

of our own day. They first exchange messages with the help of the flower-woman Hirā, and see each other from a distance. Then Sundar gets into Vidyā's chamber through the tunnel he digs, but they do not proceed to make love straightway. They hold a learned discourse in accordance with a vow Vidyā had taken not to give herself to a man unless he could vanquish her in such a discourse. Then they get secretly married, in the Gāndharva form fully recognized in ancient India, and then only do their amours begin. As to Sundar digging a tunnel, none but a dull and prosaic critic would carp at it. Such things as digging tunnels, scaling walls, jumping from windows, putting on disguise, making assignations, and eloping have been the recognized privileges of the heroes and heroines of romantic love-stories of all parts of the world, and it is good for both love and literature that those privileges have been maintained in spite of the protests of irate fathers and husbands of all times. Another important thing that has been too easily forgotten is that Bhārat-chandra's standards were those of the free aristocratic morality that prevailed up to the eighteenth century. The misconceptions that have arisen about him are mostly due to the fact that he has been judged according to the altered standards of the middle-class morality of the nineteenth century and after. Properly to place him in his own age will remove those misconceptions, and will also furnish the clue to what we consider to be his real flaw. The aristocratic-feudal civilization of India came to an end in the eighteenth century, and the inner corruption of the aristocracy of the age has left many marks on Bhārat-chandra's work. He was a court-poet, and not infrequent are the occasions when he adopts the manner of a rakish courtier with slick jests on the tongue and given to winks and leers. It is the decadent courtier in Bhārat-chandra who is responsible for the odour of decadence, of dying faith and morals, that we sometimes perceive in his poem.

*Vidyā-Sundar* is a *fleur du mal*, but it is a beautiful flower all the same, bright-hued, many-petalled, and of perfect form. It is unique in our literature as a work of art, and we may say that, like love, poetry, too, came of age in Bhārat-chandra's hands and became civilized and self-conscious. Even our best poetry before him, such as that of the Vaisnava poets, was primitive and naïve; it was almost entirely the product of spontaneous feeling and inspiration, and it lacked full sense of form and style. It was born

in the spirit, and was not properly bred by art. What beauties it possessed were the capricious gifts of nature, and gave but little indication of having been fashioned by the conscious and deliberate hand of an artist. Bhārat-chandra is the first Bengali poet with a fully developed sense of form and style, the first to study and practise poetry as an art. No one before or after him has studied the verbal and rhythmic harmonies of our tongue with such loving and patient care, no one has understood and mastered them so completely. He knows how to use words like notes in a perfectly concerted piece of music, and many of his lines are perfect enchantments of sound. He not only writes perfect lines, but complete stanzas which are flawless, and is as great a master of native Bengali rhythms as of the rhythms he imports from Sanskrit. Rabindranath Tagore is his sole rival in technical skill, but Rabindranath himself would freely acknowledge Bhārat-chandra his master in the handling of Sanskrit verse-forms. Bhārat-chandra's craftsmanship further shows itself in the care he bestows on polish and finish, on concentration and point, and on clear, correct, precise, and balanced statement. A thorough classicist in the attention he pays to the art of expression, he is the finest product of the neo-classicism that began with Ālāol in the seventeenth century. It is true that he sometimes spoils his work with over-care, and wearies us with the display of epigrams and aphorisms, though many of these have become household words. It is possible to argue that *Vidyā-Sundar*, apart from its lyrics, is no more than a brilliant *tour de force*. It is also possible to argue that Bhārat-chandra's brilliance of style is the brilliance of a frozen heart or even of moral decadence. But the thing that really matters is that in a literature so naïve and unself-conscious as ours he is a poet with full artistic consciousness. Whether or not he is morally undisciplined is a thing for moralists to squabble over; we are happy in the certain knowledge that he has the discipline of form. It is as a master of form that he dominated our poetry for nearly a hundred years; as Pope, whom he resembles in some ways, dominated English poetry of the eighteenth century. Rāmmohan Rāy<sup>1</sup> gave up the desire to be a poet because he felt that after Bhārat-chandra there were no further perfections to be won. We can be sure that there were many others in the first half of the nineteenth century who felt the same.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 107.

The death of Bhārat-chandra marks the beginning of a dark period which lasted until 1800. Cultural life was virtually extinct in Bengal in those forty years. Apart from the works which have been already noticed, there were no others worth mention except the *Kāsi-khaṇḍa*<sup>1</sup> by Rājā Jaynārāyan Ghosāl. This was a poem about Benares based on a Sanskrit original of the same name. The decline of culture in the second half of the eighteenth century was due to the prevailing political and economic conditions. The Battle of Plassey (1757) did not terminate the incessant warfare that had been going on in Bengal and other parts of India for over a century. Nor did the full assumption of Dewani (revenue collection) by the East India Company in 1765 put an end to the graft, extortion, and other vices rampant in high circles both British and Indian. The people continued to be oppressed and robbed as before, and their misery reached its climax in the terrible famine that visited Bengal in 1769-70. In the whole history of that country, whether before or during British rule, there has been no calamity comparable to that famine except the famine of 1943-4. According to Sir William Hunter, the historian, the ruin of two-thirds of the old aristocracy of lower Bengal dates from 1770, and we may add to that the ruin of the peasantry and the working class. Intellectual and cultural life could not thrive in a country that was literally starving. Even in 1811, when conditions had improved, the first Lord Minto, then Governor-General of India, said: 'Science and literature are in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India. . . . The number of the learned is not only diminished, but the circle of learning, even among those who still devote themselves to it, appears to be considerably restricted, the abstract sciences are abandoned, polite literature neglected.'

With the full establishment of British rule in the nineteenth century fundamental changes took place in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of Bengal. New influences came into operation in the literature, and new developments took place. These will be noticed in the next chapter, but a few words will be said here about the first appearance of prose and the printing press. There was some prose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it was very small in quantity and altogether devoid of literary interest. It is found in a small number of letters and legal documents, in a few treatises on astrology, medicine, and logic translated

<sup>1</sup> Also called *Kāsi-parikramā*.

from Sanskrit, and in some catechisms intended for the practice of the Sahajiyā cult. The Portuguese missionaries introduced the printing press into India in the sixteenth century, and wrote a few tracts in Bengali and some other Indian languages. The tracts were meant for the propagation of Christianity, but they helped the growth of vernacular prose. Dom Antonio (*fl.* 1663) was a Bengali who was converted into Roman Catholicism by a Portuguese missionary, and who, on himself becoming a missionary, wrote a tract entitled *Brāhman Romān Kāthalik Saṃvād*. It was an attempt, in the form of a discussion between a padre and a pandit, to prove the superiority of Christianity to Hinduism. A Portuguese missionary named Manoel da Assumpçam, who was the head of a Portuguese mission near Dacca, translated a catechism of the Roman Catholic religion under the Bengali title of *Crepar Xaxtrer Orthbhed*. He was the first person to write a grammar of the Bengali language, and his two works, with a Bengali-Portuguese lexicon attached to them, were printed in roman type in Lisbon in 1743. In the second half of the eighteenth century English and Scottish missionaries continued the work begun by the Portuguese missionaries, and Bengali pandits continued to turn out miscellaneous treatises of the sort already mentioned. But the greatest impetus to prose came from the Government. After the full assumption of power by the East India Company it was felt that the administration would be facilitated if some legal and other works were written in Bengali, and if some of the British officials knew the language of the country. *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, a Government official, came out in 1778 in response to that need. It was printed at the Government Press in Hooghly, and it was the first book in which Bengali words were printed in Bengali type. Everything connected with the Government Press in Hooghly, including the cutting of the type founts, was the work of Charles Wilkins,<sup>1</sup> another civil servant. Another memorable name in the history of printing in Bengal is that of the blacksmith Pañchānan Karmakār of Srirāmpur. Learning the art from Wilkins, he cut the type for most of the early printing presses that were set up in Srirāmpur and Calcutta.

<sup>1</sup> Later Sir Charles Wilkins; a distinguished Sanskrit scholar, and the founder, with Sir William Jones, of the Asiatic Society.



## CHAPTER IV

### CALCUTTA PERIOD

#### NINETEENTH CENTURY

##### (i) *Miscellaneous Prose*

THE two events that make the year 1800 the most convenient starting-point for this chapter are the founding of the Fort William College in Calcutta and of the Baptist Mission Press in Srirāmpur near Calcutta. An obscure little village when the East India Company acquired it in 1690, Calcutta grew in importance in the eighteenth century with a rapidity that obviously destined it to be the capital town of India. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, made it the seat of the supreme revenue administration and the supreme courts of justice, and by 1800 Calcutta had become a busy and flourishing town, the centre of the cultural, as of the political and economic, life of Bengal. It was the birthplace of all the important religious, social, educational, and literary movements of the nineteenth century, and it imparted to the literature of that period an urbanity of character and outlook which is not found in the literature of the preceding ages. The old literature was mainly the work of village poets writing for village folk, and it retained its essential rustic character even when it was produced under direct aristocratic patronage in the courts of nawabs and rajas. But the new literature that begins with the nineteenth century is mostly the work of writers who lived in Calcutta and wrote for urban readers. Being urban these writers are more cultivated and refined than their predecessors, and have a wider range of interest. Their outlook is less primitive, and their language is more polite. They do not confine themselves entirely to religious themes, and the larger part of their work is indeed secular. Even when their subject-matter is religious, it is on a higher level than Manasā, Chandī, Dharma, and the other village deities who practically monopolized literature in the previous periods. Literature lost certain qualities of simplicity and naturalness in journeying from the village to the town, but what it gained in interest, outlook, and taste more than made up for the loss. Urbanization proceeded apace as the capitalist economy introduced

by the British struck roots, and the district towns of Bengal assumed an importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which they never had before. The towns grew at the expense of the villages, on the ruin of indigenous industries, and on the disruption of village life, that took place in those centuries.

The same political and economic forces that introduced the urban note into literature also gave it a middle-class character. The rise of the middle class to power and influence in India is a recent thing, and synchronizes with the establishment of British rule. If British imperialism spelt the ruin of the old feudal aristocracy and peasantry of Bengal, it conferred prosperity on the new commercial, professional, and landed interests it called into being. In Bengal, as in other parts of the world, the new-risen middle class called itself the gentry (*bhadra-lok*), and it was the most virile, progressive, and modern-spirited section of the society. So dominant has it been in political, economic, and cultural spheres that Indo-British civilization to the present day would be most aptly labelled middle-class civilization. As a class it was most eager to receive English education, and to import Western arts and sciences into India; the Western influence on Indian life chiefly operated through this medium. It took the initiative in the great religious and social movements such as the Brāhma Samāj, and it was the main force behind the nationalist movement which afterwards crystallized as the National Congress. By far the majority of writers since 1800 have belonged to this class, with the result that the literature of this period has a distinct middle-class consciousness. Almost all the important writers were interested in social and political questions, and they were liberal humanitarians, radicals, and reformers whose principles were a diluted version of the principles prevailing in contemporary England. They were large-hearted and enthusiastic idealists, sentimental, didactic, and class-complacent.

Another thing that differentiates the Calcutta period from its predecessors is the emergence of the independent and professional man of letters. With the end of feudalism came the end of the patronage of literature by the royalty and the aristocracy, the disappearance of the courtly and priestly writer of old. Patronage had too often meant parasitism, and its disappearance relieved literature of many evils. The need to earn a livelihood developed the writer's personality, stimulated his spirit of enterprise, and

proved salutary and beneficial in many other ways. But it was not altogether an unmixed blessing. Literature now became a commodity to be bought and sold, and its commercialization only too often led to its vulgarization. In the previous periods it was the product of religious devotion untainted by pecuniary motive, and it had for that reason an idealism and a spiritual freedom it now lost. The economic freedom it gained no doubt brought many compensations, but for the average writer in a competitive capitalist society that freedom was more often than not an illusion which could only become a reality if the writer sacrificed his artistic conscience to his reader's taste.

The Fort William College was founded with the object of giving instruction to British civil servants in the law, literature, languages, religions, and customs of India. Such instruction was now considered necessary for efficient administration, since the East India Company was no longer a mere trading concern and had become the possessor of an empire. Begun to serve an administrative purpose, the Fort William College nevertheless developed into something far more useful and important; it became a centre of oriental learning and culture, and gave a great stimulus to vernacular language and literature. There were facilities for teaching Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Hindustani, Bengali, Tamil, Mahrathi, and Kanarese, but Bengali, being the local language, received the most attention. The college helped the development of Bengali in two ways: indirectly by bringing it within the pale of official recognition, and directly by the literary and linguistic work done by the members of the staff. The most important part of the language training was the colloquial and the conversational, and for that it was necessary to have text-books in prose. But as no prose works were available in Bengali, the teachers of the college had to produce their own text-books, mainly by translation from Sanskrit and English. Thus it was that the foundation of Bengali prose was laid in the Fort William College. The men who laid the foundation were William Carey (1761-1834), the professor of Sanskrit and Bengali, and his Indian colleagues.

One of the best English missionaries and educationists who have gone out to India, Carey had a genuine love for 'the beautiful language of Bengal' (his words). He wrote a Bengali grammar, compiled an English-Bengali dictionary, and was the author of two text-books entitled *Kathopakathan* (1801) and *Itihāsmālā*

(1812).<sup>1</sup> The first describes itself as 'Dialogues intended to facilitate the acquiring of the Bengali language', and is bilingual, the Bengali and English texts being printed on opposite pages. The second, a collection of stories from various sources, is from the point of view of Bengali composition perhaps the best work turned out by the teachers of Fort William College. The two books had some usefulness in their day, but Carey's importance mainly lies in the example he set and the influence he radiated. He was like a captain to the team of Bengali pandits and *munsis* (scholars) he collected around himself, and whose work, better than his, was done under his direction and encouragement. Some of them were the pandits from whom he had himself learnt the language, and whom he later appointed as his assistants in Fort William College.

The most famous of Carey's assistants was Mrityuñjay Vidyā-lankār, who translated the *Batris-simhāsan* and *Hitopades* from Sanskrit, and wrote two original works entitled *Rājāvali*<sup>2</sup> (1808) and *Prabodh-chandrikā* (1813). The first of the two original works is a semi-historical account of some Indian kings, and the second, a medley of essays and tales, is Mrityuñjay's best work and was for a long time used as a text-book in schools. Mrityuñjay was an eminent Sanskrit scholar, but for us he is too pedantic, and too conservative in social and religious outlook, to be attractive.<sup>3</sup> As a writer he never struck his proper level, and his style is either too colloquial to be literary or, more often, too highly sanskritized to be regarded as Bengali. In *Prabodh-chandrikā* he praises Sanskrit as the best of all languages, and says that Bengali is the best of all Indian vernaculars because of the preponderance of Sanskrit words in it. The same uncertainty of style is noticed in Rāmrām Vasu, who was Carey's chief assistant and had more literary potentiality than any other writer of the Fort William College group. He employs a predominantly persianized style in *Pratāpāditya-charitra*, but his *Lipimālā*, a collection of didactic treatises in epistolary form, is almost free of Persian influence. *Pratāpāditya-charitra* (1801) has the distinction of being the earliest original prose work by a native Bengali writer. It is, besides, the earliest attempt at

<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship feels some doubt about Carey being the author of these books, and believes that they were at least partly written by his pandits.

<sup>2</sup> Some modern scholars believe that *Rājāvali* was from a Sanskrit original.

<sup>3</sup> In protest against the religious reform begun by Rāmmohan Rāy Mrityuñjay wrote the *Vedānta-chandrikā* which appeared in 1817 with an English translation entitled 'An Apology for the Present System of Hindoo Worship'.

writing history in Bengali, though the history in it is mixed up with much fiction as in Mrityuñjay's *Rājāvali*.<sup>1</sup>

Carey and his colleagues were not literary men, but teachers who undertook the modest task of producing text-books. They wrote little that is original, their style is crude and unformed, and their subject-matter is a jumble of story, treatise, didactic discourse, history, biography, and what not, just as their diction is a jumble of the highly classicized and the coarsely colloquial. They are pedagogues of the old-fashioned type, involved in construction and fond of high-sounding dictionary epithets, and much of their writing must have been unintelligible to contemporary, as it is to present-day, readers. They are practically unread to-day, and their books lie on library shelves as curiosities. None the less they were the pioneers of Bengali prose and of the modern spirit in Bengali literature. They revived the literary and intellectual life of Bengal after the nearly half a century's stagnation and barrenness since the death of Bhārat-chandra Rāy. As Rāmkamal Sen,<sup>2</sup> the scholar and lexicographer, said in the Preface to his *Bengali-English Dictionary* (1830): 'Whatever has been done towards the revival of the Bengali language, its improvement and in fact the establishment of it as a language, must be attributed to that excellent man, Dr. Carey, and his colleagues.'

The teachers of Fort William College were not alone in bringing about the Bengali renaissance. Impetus also came from the Baptist Missionaries of Srirāmpur. Carey was again the moving spirit, as one of the founders of the Srirāmpur Mission and as the link between it and Fort William College. Of the assistants he had around him in the Mission the ablest were Joshua Marshman and William Ward. The earliest undertaking by the Srirāmpur Missionaries was the *Dharma-pustak*, the translation of the Bible they published between 1801 and 1809. Interested as they primarily were in the propagation of the Gospel, the *Dharma-pustak* was

<sup>1</sup> The works of the other teachers of Fort William College may also be noted: the translations of the *Hitopadesa* from Sanskrit by Golaknāth Sarmā and Rāmkisor Tarkālāṅkār; the translation of Æsop's fables by Tārinicharan Mitra, being part of a polyglot translation (entitled 'The Oriental Fabulist') in six languages under the direction and supervision of John Borthwick Gilchrist; the *Totā Itihās*, a collection of tales from the Persian *Totānāmā* via Hindi, by Chandicharan Munsī; the *Rājā Krisnachandra Rāyer Charitra*, a semi-historical biography, by Rājiv-lochan Mukhopādhyāy; and the *Purus-pariksā*, a collection of stories from Sanskrit, by Haraprasād Rāy. All these came out between 1801 and 1815.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 105.

in their view their greatest achievement. But for the student of literature, whether English or Bengali, it was a poor performance. The translators do not seem to have had any sense of the wonderful poetry of the original, and their Bengali was defective in elementary grammar, syntax, and idiom, let alone the higher qualities of style. Far from having any influence on Bengali literature and language, the *Dharma-pustak* gave the first taste of the 'Missionary Bengali', that counterblast to 'Babu English' which has never failed to send the Bengali people into fits of laughter, so comical has it sounded in their ears.

But the Srirāmpur Missionaries did other things besides translating the Bible. The printing press they set up was of inestimable service to Bengali language and literature. Practically all the books of the first two decades of the nineteenth century, including those by the teachers of Fort William College, were printed at that press. The Srirāmpur Missionaries brought out the first Bengali periodical,<sup>1</sup> and made available for the first time in print several old Bengali classics, such as Krittivās's *Rāmāyana*, Kāsirām Dās's *Mahābhārata*, and Bhārat-chandra's *Annadā-maṅgal*. Other presses were set up soon after in Calcutta and elsewhere, and the art of printing rapidly developed in Bengal. As to the far-reaching results that followed from the introduction of printing: the oral tradition of literature was finally broken, and prose developed apace. Literature now reached a much larger public than before, its interests widened, and it developed in many new directions. Journalism, hitherto impossible, began almost immediately. The foundation of all this was laid in the printing house in Srirāmpur.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century was a period of experiment and preparation rather than achievement. The works produced hardly deserve the name of literature, and consist almost entirely of text-books for schools or books of information and knowledge for the student and general reader alike. They were mostly derived from Sanskrit or English originals, and the demand for them was mainly from the schools that now came into existence. These schools taught English as one of the principal subjects, and that is the reason why many of these text-books were bilingual. The British missionaries, very active in the founding of the schools, were also very active in preparing the text-books. The London Missionary Society put forth a large number, the most notable of

<sup>1</sup> See p. 106.

which were by John Pearson.<sup>1</sup> The largest number of text-books, as well as some of the best of them, came from the Srirāmpur Missionaries after they had founded the Srirāmpur College in 1818. Felix Carey, son of William Carey, inherited his father's love of Bengali, and translated *Pilgrim's Progress*, Goldsmith's *Abridgement of the History of England*, and some other things from English. John Clark Marshman, the son of Joshua Marshman, was a miscellaneous writer best remembered for his histories of India and Bengal. These were translated into Bengali, the history of India by Marshman himself, and were heavily drawn upon by later writers. Another notable book by John Clark Marshman was the bilingual *Purāwritter Saiksipta Vivaran* ('Brief Survey of History').<sup>2</sup>

Such indeed was the preponderance of text-books that the quarter 1800-25 may be described as the school-time of modern Bengali. The foundation of prose, and of the literature generally, was being laid with educational and semi-educational books. As has been said above, in the second half of the eighteenth century polite learning had almost entirely disappeared, and arts and letters had become virtually extinct. Through education alone could the intellectual life of the country be revived and the literary spirit be rekindled. Education was thus the most urgent task of the early nineteenth century, and this task engaged the attention of Europeans and Indians alike.

The primary object of the Fort William College was administrative, and that of the Srirāmpur and other missionary societies was evangelical. But the British official and the British missionary found themselves on common ground, and united in common service to Bengali, through the interest they took in education. In the publication of text-books, as in the founding of schools, the initiative was theirs, and the quarter 1800-25 was predominantly

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *Patra-kaumudi* ('Letters on Familiar Subjects'); *Pāṭhsālār Vivaran* ('Schoolmaster's Manual'); *Vākyāvalī* ('Idiomatrical Exercises, English and Bengali'); and *Nitikathā* ('Moral Tales').

<sup>2</sup> William Yates was the most prolific of the Srirāmpur group, and his works include a translation of the Bible, a treatise on astronomy (*Jyotirvidyā*), a treatise on natural science (*Padārtha-vidyāsār*), and a Bengali reader called *Sārsamgraha*. Among other works that came out of the Mission house at Srirāmpur were a treatise on animals (*Paśwāvalī*) by John Lawson and William Hopkins Pearce; a treatise on chemistry (*Kimīā Vidyār Sār*) by John Mack; a Bengali grammar by John Wenger; translations of *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Holy War* by John Robinson; and the bilingual *Sadgun o Viryer Itihās* ('Anecdotes of Virtue and Valour') by an anonymous writer.

a period of foreign activity in the language and literature. But native initiative and talent were by no means absent. Bengali pandits, often maintained as salaried tutors, helped the British official and missionary in almost everything they wrote. There were, besides, a large number of native writers working independently. These writers, too, were primarily interested in education and the regeneration of the general intellectual life, and their work thus supplemented the work of the British official and missionary. A happy feature of the first half of the nineteenth century is the Anglo-Indian co-operation that there was in such matters as social reform and the promotion of education and literature. A good instance is the Calcutta School Book Society which was founded in 1817 with the object of facilitating the publication of school books. The Society had a membership of distinguished Englishmen and Indians such as William Carey, Tārinicharan Mitra, Rāmkaṁal Sen, and Rājā Rādhākānta Dev. The last-named is that scholar and patron of learning to whom we owe the Sanskrit encyclopaedia *Sabdakalpādrum*. Of the many text-books on various subjects published by the Calcutta School Book Society the following were the most outstanding: *Nītikathā* ('Moral Tales') compiled by Tārinicharan Mitra, Rājā Rādhākānta Dev, and Rāmkaṁal Sen; *Manorañjanetiḥās* ('Pleasing Tales') by Tārāchāḍ Datta, with parallel English and Bengali texts; and *Hitopades*, a translation of Æsop's fables from English, by Rāmkaṁal Sen. In addition Rāmkaṁal wrote a book on the annals of ancient Bengal (*Vaṅgadeser Purāṁvritta*), and compiled an English-Bengali dictionary and a medical book<sup>1</sup> based on the British pharmacopoeia. Mention may also be made of the translation of Gay's *Fables* and Johnson's *Rasselas* (in appropriately Johnsonian Bengali) by Rājā Kālikrisna Dev; the translation of Goldsmith's *History of Greece* by Ksetramohan Mukhopādhyāy; the *Vāṅgālā Itiḥās*, a history of Bengal mainly derived from John Clark Marshman, by Govindachandra Sen; and the *Jñān-chandrikā*, a popular text-book, by Gopāl-lāl Mitra. With these we step into the second quarter of the century, when the initiative for vernacular writing almost entirely passed to native authors.

Text-books, however useful, can never have more than a limited scope, and Bengali literature, particularly the prose, would indeed have remained in a state of arrested development had it not been

<sup>1</sup> Entitled *Ousadh-sār-saṁgraha*.



brought into closer contact with life, and its horizon extended, by a new venture of the Srirāmpur Missionaries. This was the *Digdarsan*, the first Bengali periodical, which, though itself an educational magazine of small size, led the way for the newspapers and the philosophical and literary journals which followed on its heels. The *Digdarsan* was edited by John Clark Marshman, and came out monthly for three years from April 1818. It was, as it described itself in the sub-title, a magazine for Indian youth, and its educational character, maintained throughout its life in both style and content, was evident from the first issue with articles entitled 'Of the Discovery of America', 'Of the Limits of Hindoosthan', 'Of the Trade of Hindoosthan', 'Mr. Sadler's Journey in a Balloon from Dublin to Holyhead', and 'Of Mount Vesuvius'. Like many text-books of the day it was bilingual, and was itself used as a text-book in some schools.

A more important venture of the Srirāmpur Missionaries was the *Samāchār Darpan*, the weekly newspaper which came out in May 1818 and continued to be published until 1851. John Clark Marshman was again the editor, but the paper was virtually conducted by his assistant Jaygopāl Tarkālāṅkāṛ. The foundation of Bengali journalism was practically laid by the *Samāchār Darpan* during its long and varied life, but the credit of being the first Bengali newspaper belongs to the short-lived *Vāṅgāl Gejeṭ* which came out a little earlier<sup>1</sup> under the editorship of Gaṅgādhara Bhaṭṭāchārya. As a paper belonging to Christian missionaries the *Samāchār Darpan* often published articles criticizing Hinduism and Hindu society, and was reluctant to print the protests those articles called forth. This led to the starting of the *Samvād Kaumudī* in 1821 by Rāmmohan Rāy and some other leaders of Hindu society. It was a weekly paper edited by Tārāchhāḍ Datta and Bhavānicharan Vandyopādhāy,<sup>2</sup> and it received many contributions from Rāmmohan Rāy. Then came the *Samāchār Chandrikā* (1822), another weekly edited by Bhavānicharan Vandyopādhāy, the *Vaṅgadūt* (1829) of Nilratan Hāldār, and finally the great *Samvād Prabhākar* (1831) of Iswar-chandra Gupta.

The future of Bengali journalism was assured with the last, and many daily and weekly newspapers cropped up in Calcutta and the district towns later in the century. The philosophical and

<sup>1</sup> Probably in 1816.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 121.

literary magazine did not lag far behind. The *Tattwabodhini Patrikā* (1843) of Aksay-kumār Datta<sup>1</sup> and the *Vaṅgadarsan* (1872) of Baṅkim-chandra Chaṭṭopādhāy<sup>2</sup> set a high standard to their contemporaries, and were followed by the *Bāndhav*, *Jñānāṅkur*, *Prachār*, *Āryadarsan*, *Navajīvan*, *Navya Bhārat*, *Bhārati*, *Sādhana*, *Janmabhumi*, *Sāhitya*, *Pravāsi*, *Mānasi*, *Bhāratvarsa*, and a host of others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first writer to extend the province of prose beyond the text-book, and to use it as the vehicle of philosophic exposition and religious and social polemic, was Rāmmohan Rāy (1772-1833). As the pioneer of literary prose and of the literature of thought, as the author of a Bengali grammar and some text-books, and as a writer of devotional songs, Rāmmohan has an assured place in our literature. But he is more than a writer; he is one of those great men who are born at a critical moment in their country's history, and who shape its destiny. With his religious and social reforms, and his activities in the cause of education and political liberty, Rāmmohan is the inaugurator of the modern age in India. He pioneered the path India was to follow in those critical days when she stood divided between the East and the West, between her own ancient civilization and the new European civilization that had arrived with British rule. Much confusion was being spread about by the extremists, one set of whom was for complete westernization and the other for continuance in the old Indian way. But Rāmmohan prescribed the middle path that lay through the blending of the best elements in the civilizations of the East and the West. Bred in the Upanisadic doctrine of the unity of all life, he knew that the civilizations of the East and the West, far from being contradictory, were but the different manifestations of the same human spirit, and could be blended into a fruitful and harmonious synthesis. No one knew better than he the need that India had to modernize herself with the help of European arts and sciences; no one played a more active part in the modernizing of India. He is the morning star of the Indian renaissance, one of the most progressive and modern-spirited persons the world has ever produced. But if he looked forward, he looked backward, too, and he no more denied the past than he refused to recognize the present. So he led a religious movement that was purged of the corruptions of

<sup>1</sup> See p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 152.

medieval and post-medieval times and derived its inspiration from the pure founts of the Vedānta and the Upanisads. The movement was both a reaffirmation of the ancient and central truths of Hinduism and a rejection of its superstitions and pernicious practices. While Rāmmohan provided for India's assimilation of the newly arrived social and scientific values of the West, he also secured her spiritual continuity with the past.

The synthesis Rāmmohan prescribed for India was part of the larger synthesis he prescribed for the world. He preached a pure theism based on the essential unity of the religious spirit in whatever part of the world that spirit might have manifested itself. He stood for a universal religion which would be free of bigotry and fanaticism, of priestcraft and sectarianism, and would bring together the peoples of the world in a spirit of understanding and co-operation. What is more, he exemplified in his own life and work the synthesis he preached. He was deeply versed in the doctrines of all the principal religions of the world—Brahmanism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity; so deeply indeed as to be the pioneer of the science of comparative theology. He was brought up in his youth on four languages, Bengali, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, and in later life he acquired a mastery of English and some knowledge of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and French. Such was his proficiency in Persian and Arabic, and in Islamic culture and theology, that he was known as the *ṣabardast maulavi*. His earliest writings were in Persian and Arabic, and show him to have been under the influence of the Muslim rationalists (Mu'tazilis) and unitarians (Muwahhidin). Of his English works, whose number is considerable, Jeremy Bentham, the greatest living English philosopher, said: 'Your works are made known to me by a book in which I read a style which, but for the name of a Hindu, I should certainly have ascribed to the pen of a superiorly educated and instructed Englishman.'

With two of his most notable English works, viz. the *Precepts of Jesus* and the *Appeals*, is connected the story of Rāmmohan's controversy with the Baptist missionaries of Srirāmpur. The dispute arose over the *Precepts of Jesus* in which Rāmmohan had separated Christ's ethical teachings from what he called the 'abstruse doctrines and miraculous relations of the New Testament'. In the true Hindu spirit he had rejected the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, but had admired the ethical teachings of Jesus. In reply to the

attack made on the *Precepts of Jesus* by the Srirāmpur missionaries Rāmmohan put forth the three powerful *Appeals*, the last with an array of argument and learning before which the greatest scholar and theologian would have quailed. He attacked Christian orthodoxy in some other pamphlets, but his personal relations with orthodox Christians was always friendly. He assisted the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff in founding a school, and generously helped William Adam, formerly a Baptist missionary, to found a unitarian church in Calcutta. Adam had been converted to unitarianism while attempting to convert Rāmmohan to trinitarianism.

The study of the Vedānta and the Upanisads in his twenties was the turning-point of Rāmmohan's life. He was so deeply impressed with their doctrines that he resolved to make it his life's work to preach them to his countrymen. The *Vedānta-grantha* and the *Vedānta-sār*, containing his Bengali version of the Vedānta, came out in 1815-16, and were followed by a series of translations from the Upanisads into Bengali and English with introductions and comments of his own. These were epoch-making publications, as they put into everybody's hands a knowledge that had hitherto been guarded as the close preserve of the Brahman priest and pandit. All the while Rāmmohan was preaching the monotheistic Vedānta creed, and was calling upon his countrymen to renounce the idolatrous and superstitious practices of popular Hinduism. Orthodox Hindus were highly indignant, but Rāmmohan was undaunted. The spirit that inspired him is best set forth in his own words:

The ground which I took in all my controversies was not that of opposition to Brahmanism, but to the perversion of it; and I endeavoured to show that the idolatry of the Brahmans was contrary to the practice of their ancestors and the principles of the ancient books and authorities which they profess to revere and obey.<sup>1</sup>

Further:

By taking the path which conscience and sincerity direct, I, born a Brahman, have exposed myself to the complainings and reproaches, even of some of my relations, whose prejudices are strong and whose temporal advantage depends upon the present system. But these, however accumulated, I can tranquilly bear, trusting that a day will arrive when my humble endeavours will be viewed with justice, perhaps

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiographical Sketch.*

acknowledged with gratitude. At any rate, whatever men may say, I cannot be deprived of this consolation: my motives are acceptable to that Being who beholds in secret and compensates openly.<sup>1</sup>

Progressive elements in the country answered his call, and the Brāhma Samāj was founded in 1828. Meantime, particularly in the years 1818–23, he was leading the agitation for the abolition of Suttee, and turning out pamphlets to silence his opponents in the orthodox camp. All aspects of public life, religious, social, educational, political, and economic, engaged his attention. He founded schools, and urged the introduction of English education into India in a forceful letter to the Governor-General.<sup>2</sup> He wrote appeals to the Supreme Court of India and to the King in Council for the liberty of the Press. With these appeals there began in India the new era of constitutional agitation for political rights. His indefatigable energy further showed itself in the founding of the three journals, the *Samvād Kaumudi*, the *Brahmunical Magazine*, and the *Mirāt-ul-Ākhbar*, the last the first Persian newspaper in India.

In 1830 Rāmmohan was decorated Raja by the Emperor of Delhi and sent as envoy to England. Among other activities he gave evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the judicial and revenue systems of India, and put forth a brilliant essay on that subject. He also wrote on the European colonization of India and on the rights of Indian widows to inherit property. He took a keen interest in the Reform Bill, considering the struggle between the Reformers and the Anti-Reformers as a 'struggle between liberty and tyranny throughout the world; between justice and injustice, and between right and wrong'. He publicly avowed that in the event of the Reform Bill being defeated he would renounce his connexion with England. Earlier in life he had been keenly interested in the French Revolution, and had championed the cause of popular freedom in Ireland, Naples, and the Spanish colonies. He gained many friends in England, and was addressed by Jeremy Bentham as his 'intensely admired and dearly beloved collaborator in the service of mankind'. There is a special sadness in his death which took place in England, not in his own country. Or perhaps it was proper that England should be the last resting-place of an Indian who believed so ardently in the fusion of the East and the West.

<sup>1</sup> *Abridgement of the Vedānta*.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 112.

As a writer of Bengali prose Rāmmohan is to be judged from his introductions to his translations of the Vedānta and the Upanisads and from his pamphlets<sup>1</sup> on Suttee and other social and religious topics. He is terse, clear, and altogether more competent than his contemporaries, but has little charm or sweetness of style. His limitations are easily understandable in view of the age in which he wrote. Bengali prose was in such an undeveloped state at the time that in the Introduction to his first Bengali work, the *Vedānta-grantha*, Rāmmohan had to give hints to the reader how to read and understand him.

The Western influence, of which Rāmmohan was the first great product, operated through several channels, but mainly through the introduction of English education. This was the name given at the time to the teaching of Western arts and sciences through the medium of English, and the demand for it came from all quarters, official and non-official, British and Indian. On the Government side the necessity was felt for the creation of an anglicized Indian intelligentsia which would be a support for the imperial power and the connecting-link between it and the masses. There was, besides, the prudential motive of training a body of Indians who would perform the clerical and the lower administrative functions at a smaller cost than if the same work had to be done by men brought over from England. The British commercial concerns advocated English education from the same prudential motive, and the Christian missionaries, such as Alexander Duff of the Scottish Mission in Calcutta, saw in anglicizing the Indian the preliminary step to christianizing him. The noblest advocates of English education were the Government officials and the non-official educationists, bred in the humanitarian ideals of British liberalism, who were anxious that India, by receiving the benefits of the Western arts and sciences, should be bound to Britain by ties superior to those of politics and commerce. Macaulay, then President of the Board of Education, and the author of the famous Minute of 1835, is the Government official to whom India's thanks are mainly due for her English education. English was adopted by the Government as the language of education in 1835, as the language of the law-courts in

<sup>1</sup> e.g. *Pravarttak o Nivarttaker Saṃvād* (two pamphlets); *Goswāmir sahī Vichār*; *Subrahmanya Sāstrir sahī Vichār*; *Kavitākārer sahī Vichār*; *Brāhmaṇ-sevadhi* (numbers 1, 2, and 3); *Pādri o Sisya Saṃvād*; *Chāri Prasner Uttar*; *Pathya-pradān*.

1838, and it was made the passport to Government service in 1844. The strongest demand for it came from among a number of progressive Hindus who saw in the modern scientific learning of Europe the secret of the superior power and efficiency of modern Europeans, and who were anxious to import that learning in order to combat the social and intellectual backwardness of their country. The greatest of these Hindus was, of course, Rāmmohan Rāy, who forcefully put the case for English education in the famous letter he wrote in 1823 to the Governor-General protesting against the proposed establishment of a Sanskrit college in Calcutta.

This seminary (similar in character to those which existed in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon) can only be expected to load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use to the possessor or to society. The pupils will there acquire what was known 2,000 years ago, with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since produced by speculative men. . . . I beg your Lordship will be pleased to compare the state of science and literature in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon with the progress of knowledge since he wrote. If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen. . . . In the same way the Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such had been the policy of the British legislature.

It should be remembered, however, that none of the promoters of English education—the progressive Hindus, the missionaries, or the Government—had it as their object to discourage Bengali. The Indian vernaculars not yet being sufficiently developed, the initial question was whether English or the classical languages, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, should be the medium of Western education; and the decision was rightly made in favour of English. The vernaculars were not neglected; the system of education very soon became bilingual, and it was hoped that the contact with English would help the vernaculars to develop. The hope has been amply justified in the case of Bengali, which has since replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools, and is now a subject for the highest degree courses of Calcutta University.

The Hindu College, founded in Calcutta in 1817, was the premier seat of Western learning in the early nineteenth century. Under the guidance of David Hare, the first principal, and H. L. V.

Derozio and D. L. Richardson, professors of English, the college became a centre of great intellectual activity, in fact the nursery of the modern spirit in India. It effected a revolution in the ideas of the young men whom it inspired with love of Western arts and sciences. Some of those men were the makers of modern Bengal and modern Bengali literature.<sup>1</sup> Most of the social and political reformers of the age too were old students of the Hindu College. We do not forget the service rendered to Bengali literature by members of the Sanskrit College of Calcutta,<sup>2</sup> but their work, on the whole, was less important. They were conservative and carried on the old Indian tradition, while the writers of the Hindu College group were anglicists and modernists.

The first effect of English education was that a considerable section of young Bengal became denationalized and hyper-westernized. In the *Sekālār Ekāl* by Rājñārāyan Vasu<sup>3</sup> we get an amusing picture of the fashionable cult of westernism, of the bright young things of the day crying down everything Indian and exaggerating the value of everything European. Many embraced Christianity not so much out of religious conviction as for the reason that it was the religion of Europeans. Many attempted literary work in English out of contempt for Bengali. Madhusudan Datta<sup>4</sup> is the most conspicuous example of this. For the new Bengali *bourgeois* and intellectual there was a particular snob-value in aping the ruling race, and they earned for themselves the jibe that they had successfully westernized themselves in everything except the colour of their skin. The intense missionary activity that set in after the passing of the India Act of 1833, and the prevailing corruptions of Hinduism, were partly responsible for their adoption of Christianity; just as the undeveloped and primitive condition of Bengali literature was partly responsible for their desire to write in English. Western learning and civilization acted like strong wine on the young Indians of the day, and it was inevitable, considering the degradation into which the country had sunk, that they should go to extremes and try to westernize themselves completely.

The tide turned in the second half of the century when the movement began for the creation of a national culture. The

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Kāsiprasād Ghose, Rāmgopāl Ghose, Krisnamohan Banerjea, Devendranāth Tagore, Prasannakumār Tagore, Aksay-kumār Datta, Govind Chandra Dutt, Bhudeb Mukerji, Rājñārāyan Vasu, and Madhusudan Datta.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 126. Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar was the greatest of them.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 136.



westernized writers no longer held themselves aloof from the national life, and devoted themselves henceforth to the national literature and culture. The Brāhma Samāj succeeded in checking the tendency towards conversion to Christianity, and the newly awakened spirit of political nationalism stimulated the interest in national culture. While patriots like Rāmgopāl Ghose and Harish Chandra Mukherjee<sup>1</sup> were awakening the political consciousness of their countrymen, westernized intellectuals like Madhusudan Datta were coming back to their mother tongue. Some of them—and Madhusudan Datta is again the most conspicuous example—had realized the futility of trying to distinguish themselves by writing in English. They had also realized the great opportunities that were waiting for them in their native literature, and the spiritual suicide that they had courted so long by withholding themselves from the national life. The return of these westernized writers was a momentous event in the history of Bengali literature. They were the real makers of the modern literature, and the modern period properly began with them. Although Western influence had been in operation since the beginning of the century, it produced its best results in their work.

The Indian renaissance, although it began in 1800, did not fully come to its own until the second half of the century. The writers of the first half were either British missionaries and educationists who did not possess a sound knowledge of Bengali, or Bengali pandits who did not possess a sound knowledge of English. The writers after 1850 were equally well versed in Bengali and English, and they enriched their native literature with the ideas they had acquired from English and other European literatures.

It is now common knowledge that British rule in India, besides bringing about a political and economic revolution, brought about a greater revolution in thought and ideas. Old ways of life were challenged, and new lines of development were pursued. The most significant things in the literature of the nineteenth century were born of the impact of the West upon the East. This impact was spread over every sphere of life, religious, cultural, social, political, and economic. The advent of Western learning in Bengal was of importance comparable with the advent of the Renaissance in fifteenth-century Europe, and its immediate effect was to stimulate literary production on an unprecedented scale. Even allowing for

<sup>1</sup> Editor of the *Hindu Patriot*.

the possibility that some earlier works have perished with the manuscripts that contained them, and that others may yet be discovered, the literature produced in the century and a half after 1800 is still probably larger in quantity than the whole of the literature produced in the nine or ten centuries before that date.

In quality, as well as quantity, this literature is comparable with the contemporary literature of minor European countries, and its main bulk bears the mark of Western influence in some form or other. The immediate and whole-hearted response Bengali literature gave to Western influence appears all the more remarkable when we remember that it had not been touched by any foreign influence before. The literature of the nineteenth century, particularly of the second half, was the work of writers in whom the East and the West had met, and who represented in different ways and degrees the harmonies and discords that had resulted from that meeting. Western influence is seen quantitatively in the mass of fiction, poetry and drama, in the literature of information, thought and knowledge, and, above all, in an immense journalistic literature, all either translated from English or almost entirely based on English or European models. The influence is seen qualitatively in such works as the epic (*Meghnād-vadh*) of Madhusudan Datta, the novels of Bankim-chandra Chattōpādhyāy, and the devotional songs and many lyric poems of Rabindranath Tagore, which are Indian in essential character and outlook but European in form and technique. Both these classes of work bear the impress of European thought, sometimes even feeling. The best writers of the nineteenth century and the present day belong to the second class, as will the best writers of the future for a long time. This does not mean that there has been no conservative reaction against Western influence, but that the reaction has been sectional and ineffective. The cultural development of Bengal under British rule has mainly been in the direction, indicated by Rāmmohan Rāy, of a synthesis of the East and the West.

The movement for a national culture that began in the second half of the century was not directed against westernism and modernism as such, but against the slavish westernism, and the extravagant modernism, that had prevailed before. What is more, the movement was equally strongly directed against the conservatism that stood for the perpetuation of the old Indian conditions. The social novelists and dramatists of the age furnish some good

instances of this. They show up the evils of both hyper-westernism and hyper-easternism, of excessive modernism and excessive conservatism, and they suggest a *via media*, a judicious compromise between European and Indian ways. Of the two comedies written by Madhusudan Datta, one ridicules the follies of the hyper-westernized younger generation, and the other exposes the vices of the older generation living in the orthodox Indian way.<sup>1</sup> The first of these plays acquires a particular piquancy when we remember how hyper-westernized the author himself was in his youth. But he was a different person when he wrote the play, and the change that came over him was the signal for the change that came over the anglicized community generally. The craze for writing in English died down by the seventies, and the westernized intellectuals realized that they would best employ taste and talent, which they had cultivated by the study of English, in improving the standard, and increasing the stock, of their own native literature.

In the new chapter that thus began in the history of Bengali literature there was no room for the writers of the old school untouched by Western ideas. How great a gulf separated the new school from the old may be seen from the following remarks of Baṅkim-chandra Chatterjī on Iswar-chandra Gupta:

Madhusudan, Hem-chandra, Navin-chandra and Rabindranath are the poets of educated Bengal. Iswar Gupta is the poet of Bengal. The 'pure' Bengali poets [i.e. untouched by Western ideas] are no longer born—they cannot indeed be born. Nor is there any need for them to be born. Unless Bengal goes backward, to a state of degradation, the 'pure' Bengali poet will no more be born.

Iswar Gupta was the last of the old school, and he was separated from Baṅkim, and from the writers mentioned by Baṅkim, by the revolution in taste and ideas that Western influence brought about.

Fully to assess the effects of Western influence it will be necessary for us to recapitulate some of the things that we have already said about the condition of our literature before the nineteenth century. Bengali then occupied the same subordinate position to Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic as the modern European literatures did to Latin and Greek in the medieval and Renaissance times. The classical languages performed the important functions of the Church and the State, and were the media of higher education and

<sup>1</sup> See p. 141.

culture. Bengali was the literature of the common people, and it led a second-hand existence on themes and modes almost all derived from Sanskrit. It was deficient in taste and refinement, in the sense of form and style, and it had the limited range of ideas and experience of a folk literature. It had no prose—and prose is the backbone of a literature—no critical, historical, political, or scientific writing, no works of thought and knowledge. There was some social matter in the poems of the *laukik* cults, but it was meagre, as the life from which those poems sprang was primitive and rustic. The poetry was more musical than poetic, the poems being meant to be sung as songs or, when long, to be chanted in a semi-musical manner. The versification accordingly obeyed the laws of music rather than those of poetry, and was based, not on accent (which the Bengali language has not got) or syllable, but on *mātrā* (*mora*: weight of syllable). Nor did the poets generally take advantage of the variety of verse-forms which were possible within the *mātrāvritta* (moraic) system, and of which the models could have been found in Sanskrit poetry. They were content instead to write in the stereotyped Payār measure, and with no other variation than the occasional use of the Tripadi. Both the Payār and the Tripadi observed fixed medial and terminal pauses, allowed no overflow, and encouraged a sing-song effect. The monotony of Bengali poetry, shackled to the Payār from Krittivās to Iswar Gupta, does not need to be emphasized. It is true that the poems gained some variety from the musical tunes and modes in which they were sung, but their metrical monotony always remained, as did their character of being a hybrid between poetry and music.

In addition to the narrow range of outlook and expression there was the narrow range of subject-matter. It will be no exaggeration to say that the literature subsisted on starvation diet in the nine or ten centuries before 1800. A large part of it merely retold the old and well-known stories of the *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata*, *Bhāgavata*, and other Sanskrit Purāṇas, while another large part had for its subject-matter the equally well-known (though less old) story of the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. The story of Vidyā and Sundar was the only one from Sanskrit which possessed novelty of interest at the time when it was first used by our poets. Of the half dozen indigenous stories<sup>1</sup> belonging to the main *laukik* cults the quality

<sup>1</sup> The stories of Bipulā, Kāketu, Dhanapati, Lāusen, Maynāmati, and Goraksanāth.

was poor,<sup>1</sup> and their literary possibilities had been used up long before 1800. In respect of both form and content the condition of Bengali literature at the time of Rāmmohan Rāy was similar to the condition of English literature at the time of Chaucer.

The main reason for the poverty of the literature was that it had no independent, secular life. It was entirely harnessed to religious or semi-religious cults, and it was intended for sectarian propaganda. The writers were prompted by religious rather than artistic motive, and were more interested in glorifying the deities and saints of their own sects than in studying man and nature. The literature was dominated by the spirit of Bhakti (devotion), and did not possess a single work inspired by pure human interest or pure joy of living. So deep was the religious obsession that even when the theme was secular, as for instance the secret love of Vidyā and Sundar, a religious framework had to be imposed on it. The human note was struck more clearly in the Vaisnava Pads than anywhere else, but even there human love was put in an allegorical-spiritual setting and regarded as the training-ground for religious devotion. The most deadening effect of the religious influence was on the writer's personality. The doctrine of self-suppression was carried too far, to the point where the writer was left with nothing but a simple, primitive piety. Hence his lack of initiative and enterprise, his escape into stagnant authoritarianism and effete conventionality.

Being a literature of escape Bengali had little interest in, or contact with, the actualities of life. The bulk of it was monotonous, platitudinous, convention-ridden, and devoid of substance, variety, and virility. A comparison with its present state will show how the contact with English literature has given it substance and variety, intellectuality and modernity. It has developed a wide range of interests and has become a fit medium for adult and civilized consciousness. More important than anything else, it has become humanized. The old mystical-devotional obsession persists but does not prevail, and the literature now has increasing contact with life and with worldly things. The English language has given the Bengali writer access not only to English literature, but, through translations, to the literatures of Europe. The Bengali writer need no longer live in the darkness and isolation of his native medievalism; he is a citizen of the entire modern world. Bengali was the

<sup>1</sup> An exception should be made of the *Manasā* fable.

quickest and the most whole-hearted of the Indian vernacular literatures in responding to Western influence; that is the reason why it acquired the position of the premier modern Indian literature in output and original power. As in the nineteenth century, its influence still extends over all the other Indian literatures, and, next to English, it is the greatest modernizing and vitalizing force in present-day India.

Nourished by Western thought and feeling, Bengali literature put forth new leaves on every branch. New developments took place in poetry and drama, and prose was born. The birth of prose led to the birth of journalism, the novel and the short story, the essay, and other forms of writing. Prose and journalism were born before 1850, but for the others we have to wait until after that date. As already stated, Western influence was not fully operative until after the young Bengali intellectuals, denationalized and hyper-westernized by the first impact of Western civilization, had returned to the service of their native culture and literature. Iswar Gupta, the last of the old school of writers untouched by Western influence, died in 1859, and the modern movement in Bengali literature properly began in the late fifties. Although the Hindu College had been established in 1817, English education did not become widespread until after English was adopted as the medium of instruction by the Government in 1835. There is, besides, a further reason why Western influence did not bear fruit earlier. In the second half of the eighteenth century Bengal had been reduced to the lowest depths of poverty, starvation, and ignorance, and the first half of the nineteenth century was mainly taken up with economic recovery, social reformation, and cultural regeneration. The literature practically had to be reborn in 1800, and it had to have some time to absorb the Western spirit, and so to develop its powers, before it could achieve any remarkable results.

What has been said above will explain the preponderance of text-books, and the absence of original works of merit, in the years 1800 to 1850. The barrenness of that half-century is most evident in its poetry, which was as meagre in quantity as it was old-fashioned and inferior in quality. Iswar Gupta<sup>1</sup> was the greatest literary figure of the age, but his poetry was old-fashioned and mediocre. The great fame he enjoyed as a poet in his own day has

<sup>1</sup> See p. 134.

since been eclipsed by his fame as a journalist. He is virtually the father of Bengali journalism, and edited several periodicals, of which the *Samvād Prabhākar* was the greatest. Its success encouraged Iswar Gupta to start the monthly *Prabhākar*. The two papers received contributions from the leading writers of the day, and they served as a training-ground for many of the best writers of the younger generation. Raṅgalāl Vandyopādhāy and Manomohan Vasu, Aksay-kumār Datta and Dinabandhu Mitra, Baṅkim-chandra Chāṭṭopādhāy and Hem-chandra Vandyopādhāy—they all started their literary career in the *Prabhākar* under the guidance of Iswar Gupta. The student of Bengali literature owes a special debt of gratitude to Iswar Gupta for the lives he wrote of Mukundarām, Bhārat-chandra, Rāmprasād, and some other old writers. These were the first literary biographies compiled in our language. Iswar Gupta was no prose stylist, however, and his artificial rhythms, labyrinthine clauses, and jingling alliterations verge on the fantastic.

The growth of prose was the main thing in the years 1800 to 1850. At its birth prose was clumsy and club-footed, pedantic and text-bookish, involved in syntax and loaded with jaw-breaking classical terms. It was not a spontaneous growth from the natural language of the people, but an artificial coinage of the pandit, who created it with the help of dictionary epithets from Sanskrit. The periodical and, later, the novel and the drama helped to relieve it of its classical coat of armour, to make it modern, and to give it the naturalness and flexibility of the spoken language. The history of prose style in the nineteenth century is that of the replacement of Sādhū-bhāsā (literary language) by Chalit-bhāsā (colloquial language), and the influence of English was uppermost in bringing about that change. The pandit, the original creator of prose, knew little or no English, but the later writers had all of them received an English education at school and had been bilingual from early youth; with the result that, consciously or unconsciously, they introduced the characteristics of English prose while writing in Bengali. The extent to which Bengali prose has become anglicized in texture and rhythm will be seen from the simple fact that all the English punctuation points are now thoroughly at home in Bengali as they are in English, although prior to the nineteenth century Bengali had no point other than the full-stop.

The transition from the old to the new prose is noticeable in

Bhavānīcharan Vandyopādhāy. We have already met him as a journalist,<sup>1</sup> but he is better known as the author of some social sketches, such as *Kalikātā Kamalālay*, *Navabābuvilās*, and *Nava-bibivilās*, in which he shows up the follies and vices of the new-rich Bengali of the twenties and thirties. Bhavānīcharan has too broad a sense of fun, and is given to coarse vituperation; but he writes with observation and knowledge, and his social sketches are among the forerunners of the Bengali novel. He is not sure of prose as his medium, and mixes it freely with verse; nor is he able properly to blend the Sādhū-bhāsā and the Chalit-bhāsā. None the less he is of considerable historical importance. As a pioneer of the colloquial style and social satire he is the direct ancestor of Ṭek-chād Ṭhākur<sup>2</sup> and Kālīprasanna Siṃha.<sup>3</sup> Even more important, he was the first writer who made an effort to use prose for creative work and for giving literary pleasure. He has the long-windedness and other faults of the age, but is capable on occasion of writing with remarkable directness and ease. He is one of those writers, met in every literature, who have considerable influence although their achievement is small.

Another writer who deserves to be noticed is Krisnamohan Vandyopādhāy, the learned compiler of the cyclopaedia of general knowledge entitled *Vidyākālpadrum*. Like many other educational and semi-educational works of the age the cyclopaedia came out in Bengali and English, and its contents were mostly derived from English and Sanskrit sources.

Far more important than any prose-writer noticed so far is Aksay-kumār Datta (1820-86). He shares with Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar<sup>4</sup> the credit of having created the new prose, of having perfected the style that was first rudely shaped by Rāmmohan Rāy. Like Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar he inherited Rāmmohan's zeal for reform, and the two authors—they were born in the same year—ably carried on the fight Rāmmohan had begun against intellectual backwardness and social corruption. Aksay, however, was not a practical reformer like Rāmmohan and Vidyāsāgar, as his indigent circumstances and ill health dēbarred him from active work. His life was one continuous struggle, and the best part of it was spent in privacy and retirement. For long periods he was virtually confined to his desk, but he made his pen a powerful

<sup>1</sup> See p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 123.



weapon. He exercised great influence through his writings, and was one of the main forces of progress and enlightenment in his time. Even as a boy he showed that industry and fortitude, that single-hearted devotion to duty and selfless pursuit of knowledge, for which he won universal admiration in later life. He owed his literary career to Iswar Gupta,<sup>1</sup> who discovered his talent and encouraged him to write for the *Prabhākar*. Iswar Gupta also introduced him to Devendranāth Tagore,<sup>2</sup> the religious and social reformer who succeeded Rāmmohan Rāy as leader of the Brāhma Samāj and was himself a prose-writer of some distinction. Aksay-kumār's great chance in life came when Devendranāth started the monthly magazine *Tattwabodhini Patrikā* and put him in charge of it. The young editor—he was then only twenty-three—fully justified his appointment, and for twelve years conducted the paper so ably as to make it a power in the land. His scientific and philosophical articles increased the store of the country's thought and knowledge, and his ethical dissertations corrected its manners and morals. The *Tattwabodhini* created a great tradition of serious and thoughtful writing, and raised the whole level of Bengali journalism. On retiring from the editorship of that paper Aksay-kumār got a post as school-master through the friendly offices of Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar, but his health did not permit him to keep it, and he virtually retired from all work in 1855.

*Chārupāṭh*, Aksay-kumār's most popular work, has been used as a text-book in schools ever since its publication. For the philosophical and scientific writings, e.g. *Bāhya-vastur sahit Mānav-prakṛitir Sambandha*,<sup>3</sup> *Dharma-niti*, and *Padārtha-vidyā*, the author was largely indebted to English works. His most famous work, the *Bhāratvarsīya Upāsak Sampradāy*, was based on Horace Hayman Wilson's *Religious Sects of the Hindus*, but the matter was corrected and enlarged. It is a work equally remarkable for learning and exposition, and more than half of it embodies Aksay-kumār's own investigation. He was the first Bengali writer to employ modern and scientific methods of inquiry, and he shaped the language into a fit instrument of argument and discourse.

It should not be supposed, however, that Aksay-kumār's thought is always profound and subtle, or that his language is entirely free from the pedantic circumlocution and turgid rhetoric of his pre-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Father of Rabindranath Tagore. See p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> This was based on the *Constitution of Man* by George Coombe.

decessors. As a matter of fact he only too often drops into the sententiousness and banality of that age of middle-class reformation in which he lived. The new *bourgeoisie* of Bengal had a passion for moralization like the *bourgeoisie* of other parts of the world at all times, and undertook the task of self-improvement with the same comical ardour and intensity. Hence the complacency and solemnity with which Aksay-kumār and his contemporaries trot out the dullest platitudes. It is also interesting to note how the didacticism of the native Bengali brand was nourished and reinforced by the didacticism that came from England. The English books that were most widely read, and had the most influence, were of the type represented by Isaac Watts's *Improvement of the Mind*,<sup>1</sup> Maria Edgeworth's *Moral Tales*,<sup>2</sup> Robert and William Chambers's *Moral Class Book*,<sup>3</sup> and Samuel Smiles's *Character and Self-Help*. The taste for these books was diffused by the missionaries, educationists, civil servants, business men, and other empire-builders from the English suburbs. As the British Empire became firm-founded, so did the solemnity of Victorian England become widespread in India.

Aksay-kumār was a teacher and a reformer rather than a man of letters, and could instruct and exhort, but not entertain. In his hands Bengali prose acquired the much-needed qualities of clarity and vigour, but retained the derivative, utilitarian, and didactic character it had had from its birth. But a new age in its history had already begun, and a new prose, one that was a fit instrument of literary artistry, had already been created. Its creator was the great Iswar-chandra Sarmā (1820-91), great as writer, scholar, educationist, social reformer, and philanthropist; and the book that began the new prose was his *Vetāl Pañchaviṃśati*, published in 1847. Born of poor parents, Iswar-chandra had to struggle hard in early life, and is one of the world's greatest self-made men. On completing his education at the Sanskrit College, Calcutta, he was awarded the title of Vidyāsāgar, and soon after appointed Head Pandit in Fort William College. Acquiring early fame as scholar and teacher he became the Secretary, and later the Principal, of the Sanskrit College. The reforms he introduced

<sup>1</sup> This was translated by Krisnamohan Vandyopādhyāy as *Chittotkarsavidhān*.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Edgeworth's story 'Reward of Honesty' was translated by Krisnamohan Vandyopādhyāy.

<sup>3</sup> This was translated by Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar and Rājkrisna Vandyopādhyāy under the title of *Nitibodh*.

there modernized the entire system of Sanskrit education in Bengal. As Inspector of Schools and Director of Bethune College he did invaluable work for the education of boys and girls. Even more important than these was the movement he led for legalizing the remarriage of widows. His reforms aroused bitter opposition in orthodox quarters, but like Rāmmohan Rāy he was invincible in polemic. Some of his pamphlets in support of widow-remarriage and the abolition of polygamy are masterpieces of argument and erudition. An ardent fighter for progress, he was one of the makers of modern Bengal. Great as were the qualities of his head, the qualities of his heart were even greater. Living a simple life he used to spend practically all his income in charity, and Vidyāsāgar the philanthropist is still a household word in Bengal. He was also noted for great integrity and independence of character, and twice resigned high-paid government posts on questions of principle.

Vidyāsāgar brought to the service of his mother tongue the great acquirements of his classical scholarship. He translated some sections of the *Mahābhārata*, compiled several Sanskrit readers and grammars (still the standard works for students), and wrote a critical dissertation on Sanskrit language and literature entitled *Samskṛita Bhāṣā o Samskṛita Sāhitya Visayak Prastāv* (1853). The dissertation was the first of its kind in Bengali, and the fact that it could be written, and written so well, shows how greatly the capacity of that language had increased in Vidyāsāgar's hands. His first published Bengali work, *Vetāl Pañchaviṃśati*, was written for the students of Fort William College, and was followed by a large number of other text-books. Almost all of them, as for instance *Vāṅgālār Itihās*, *Ĵivan-charit*, *Bodhoday*, *Kathāmālā*, *Charitāvali*, and *Ākhyān-maṅjari*, immediately became standard works for schools, and remain so to the present day. Though only text-books, they are nevertheless important for the reason that it was partly through them that Vidyāsāgar carried out his great work of reforming the Bengali language. Before him the language was uncouth and unshaped, and in confusion, but Vidyāsāgar gave it order and system, clear meaning and correct form. That is at once evident in the four tales that are his major works: *Vetāl Pañchaviṃśati* (based on a Hindi original), *Sakuntalā*<sup>1</sup> (based on the play by Kālidāsa), *Sitār Vanavās*<sup>2</sup> (based on the *Uttararāmacharita* by

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1854.

<sup>2</sup> Published in 1860.

Bhavabhūti), and *Bhrāntivilās*<sup>1</sup> (based on Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*). These too were meant to be used as text-books, and their subject-matter is not original. But they are not translations either, and may be regarded as largely original works. In any case their importance is in their language and style, not in their content. Here, in these four works, the true Bengali prose has at last arrived.

With the rise of the middle class in the nineteenth century the demand for literature became more widespread than it had been in the past. Culture and enlightenment were sought by large masses of the population, while in the past they were restricted to the wealthy, academic, and priestly circles. The writers lived in towns (the majority in Calcutta) and wrote books that were widely circulated by the printing press; while their predecessors had lived in villages and had sung or recited their works to small audiences. A democratic literature calls for a standard literary language, and Vidyāsāgar was the artificer of standard literary Bengali. He was the first to detect the natural rhythms of Bengali speech, and to deduce from them the basic form and structure of Bengali prose. Far from being antiquated or obsolete, his works have lost nothing of their original freshness. The language he created is the normal and standard language whose laws have remained valid to the present day, and are likely to remain so in the future. It was a language which everybody could use, and at the same time it had elements with which great writers could do great things. The pandits of Fort William College, the British missionaries, and the other native and foreign writers before Vidyāsāgar, had overloaded their language with Sanskrit words and had added unnaturalness to unintelligibility by blindly following the syntax either of Sanskrit or of English. But Vidyāsāgar borrowed no more than could be harmoniously blended with Bengali and was necessary to strengthen and clarify its native genius. That is how he ensured the purity of his language, while his predecessors had written in one which cannot properly be described as Bengali. His language was close to common life, and at the same time raised to the higher power of art; it was colloquial, and at the same time refined and elegant; lucid and precise, and yet colourful and musical; modern, and yet bound by the navel-cord to Sanskrit. The writers before him had observed an arbitrary divorce between *Chalit-bhāṣā* (colloquial language) and *Sādhu-*

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1869.

bhāsā (literary language), and their style had faltered between the coarseness of the first and the pedantic obscurity of the second. But Vidyāsāgar reformed them both and created a style which combined the naturalness of the one with the strength of the other. To have fused into a happy unity the vernacular and classical elements of the language was in itself a glorious achievement, but Vidyāsāgar achieved more: he gave Bengali prose its distinctive music. From first to last, from the somewhat formalized *Vetāl Pañchavimsati* to the lightly running *Bhrāntivilās*, we are always aware of a sensitive ear directing the disposition of his words and pauses. Here at last is a writer who has realized that prose should have beauty of sound as well as clarity of sense, and that its rhythm is different from the rhythm of poetry. The prose that there was before Vidyāsāgar either had no music at all, or had a bastard, pseudo-poetic music.<sup>1</sup> Now a new harmony, 'the other harmony of prose', was born in our language.

As is to be expected, Vidyāsāgar was the main influence on the other prose-writers of the second half of the century. Some of them were his colleagues and students at the Sanskrit College, and were directly inspired by him. They modelled their style on his, and like him devoted their classical scholarship to the pursuit of the vernacular tongue. Tārāsaṅkar Tarkaratna<sup>2</sup> retold the story of Bānabhaṭṭa's Sanskrit romance in *Kādambari*, and Rāmgati Nyāyaratna wrote two romances, *Romāvati* and *Ilchhobā*, in the medieval Sanskrit manner. Tārāsaṅkar's *Kādambari* (1854) was one of the outstanding works of the age and still retains its vogue. Rāmgati was a prolific writer, and his most important work, *Vāṅgālā Bhāsā o Vāṅgālā Sāhitya Visayak Prastāv* (1873), is the first detailed account of Bengali literature to be written in Bengali. It was modelled on Vidyāsāgar's dissertation on Sanskrit literature mentioned above, and it served as guide to many later historians of Bengali literature. Krisnakamal Bhaṭṭācārya, one of the most distinguished scholars of the time, wrote some tales which became very popular and speeded the coming of the novel. The best of these, *Durākāṅkher Vrithā Bhraman*, was derived from an English book called the *Romance of History*. Krisnakamal also retold the story of Bernardin de St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*. Another French

<sup>1</sup> As in *kathakatā* (story-telling), *yātrā* (indigenous drama), and other popular entertainments, and in some of Iswar Gupta's prose.

<sup>2</sup> He also made a free version of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*.

classic, Fénelon's *Télémaque*, became known to Bengali readers through the translation, via English, of Rājkrishna Vandyopādhāy.<sup>1</sup> The Arabian Nights Tales found a translator in Nilmani Basāk, well known in that age for his *Navanāri*. Dwārakānāth Vidyābhusan translated Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, but is better known for the *Somprakās*, a political journal.

In addition to the Sanskrit College group there were several other writers who, because they were members of the Hindu College, are known as the Hindu College group. Madhusudan Datta is, of course, the greatest of these, but the *Hekṭar-vadh*, his only prose work, shows him to have been no prose-writer. Devendranāth Ṭhākur<sup>2</sup> was a religious leader rather than a literary man, but has a place in our literature as the founder of the *Tattwabodhini Patrikā*. He was, besides, the author of many sermons, and of an autobiography which is agreeable reading. Rājñārāyan Vasu too was a religious preacher rather than a man of letters, but will be always remembered for the *Sekāl ār Ekāl* (1874), an attractive little account of the changing Bengal of the nineteenth century, and for the lecture on Bengali literature entitled *Vāṅgālā Bhāṣā o Sāhitya Visayak Vaktritā* (1878). A more important writer than Devendranāth and Rājñārāyan was Bhudev Mukhopādhāy, who was Madhusudan Datta's fellow student at the Hindu College and Vidyāsāgar's successor as an educationist. His best work lay in his moral and social essays, such as the *Āchār Prabandha*, *Pārvārik Prabandha*, and *Sāmājīk Prabandha*; but the *Āitiḥāsik Upanyās*, adapted from the afore-mentioned *Romance of History*, deserves mention as one of the forerunners of the historical novel.

The social novel, and indeed the first regular and original novel, had already arrived. This was the *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (1858) by Pyārichāḍ Mitra, better known by the pseudonym of Ṭek-chāḍ Ṭhākur. Prose-writers before Ṭek-chāḍ had almost all borrowed their material from Sanskrit or English, but Ṭek-chāḍ showed a commendable concern for originality by inventing his own material. He had the didactic spirit characteristic of the nineteenth century, and his work is a cautionary tale written with the primary object of showing 'the pernicious effects of allowing children to be improperly brought up'.<sup>3</sup> The novel originally appeared in a monthly paper called the *Māsik Patrikā* which Ṭek-chāḍ had

<sup>1</sup> See p. 123, footnote.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 122. Ṭhākur is anglicized as Tagore.

<sup>3</sup> English preface to the first edition.

founded for the education of women.<sup>1</sup> The hero, a young and half-educated scapegrace of a new-rich middle-class family, was a common type in the early nineteenth century. Bhavānīcharan Vandyopādhāy<sup>2</sup> had already satirized the type in the *Navabā-buvilās*, and there can be no doubt about his influence on Tek-chād. The story of *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* is thin and loosely put together, the incidents are irrelevant, and the characters shadowy; but the author has a real, though a broad and crude, sense of fun. He has a watchful eye for human folly and vice, and a good knowledge of social manners and customs, but his blatant moralizing spoils his comedy. He is the pioneer of the novel rather than a good novelist, and it would even be fair to call *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* a series of sketches rather than a novel. Its linguistic interest now outweighs the literary, particularly because it was one of the main forces that brought about the new prose of the second half of the century. At the time of its publication, as in the beginning of the century, prose was still under the domination of the Sādhubhāsā (literary language). But Tek-chād was a stout champion of the Chalit-bhāsā (colloquial language), and wrote in a predominantly colloquial style. This was a daring thing to do, and Tek-chād was taken to task by the purists and traditionalists. But he influenced some of the younger writers, notably Baṅkim-chandra Chatterjopādhāy, and at last the Chalit-bhāsā secured its rightful place in polite literature.

As we have already seen, the prose literature of the first half of the century had mostly consisted of text-books, and the Sādhubhāsā had been of great help in their preparation. But a more natural and intimate language was needed for the novel and the other forms of creative literature that began after 1850. The language of the pandit had provided the skeleton of the prose style, but the flesh and blood, and the living breath, could only come from the language of the people. These are among the reasons which made the younger writers turn to the untapped resources of the colloquial language. For the vitality, variety, freshness, and modernity that our prose literature has acquired as the result, our thanks are in a large measure due to the pioneer effort of Tek-chād Thākur.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The *Rāmāraṅjikā*, *Bāmātosini*, and some other of Tek-chād's later works were designed for the instruction of women.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Bhavānīcharan Vandyopādhāy had used the colloquial style before Tek-chād, but in a less effective and less influential way.

He was sufficiently a realist to make his characters speak in their own appropriate patois, to use coarse and vulgar expressions. But there was a flaw in his style, which arose not from the fact that he used the colloquial language, but from the way in which he used it. It does not seem to have occurred to him that there is a difference between the spoken language and the written language, and that the latter, however close it may be to the former, must not be an exact transcript of it. Ṭek-châd courts obscurity by using many dialect words which must have been generally unintelligible even in his own day, and many of his passages are chaotic for lack of that minimum attention to grammar and syntax which is indispensable to good writing. In view of this it seems certain that he did not realize the hope, expressed in the Preface to *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl*, that his book would be useful to foreigners wishing to acquire a knowledge of colloquial Bengali. One would think that he was carried away by his enthusiasm for the colloquial language, but, strangely enough, he often uses literary terms for which more suitable colloquial equivalents were easily available. For these reasons Ṭek-châd's work remains an experiment and nothing more. His starkly realistic manner did not catch on, and the future development of Bengali prose style took place through the judicious mixture of Sādhu-bhāsā and Chalit-bhāsā on the lines indicated by Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar.

Ṭek-châd's interest in social reform is all too evident in the stories contained in the volume entitled *Mad Khāoyā Barā Dāy Jāt Thākār ki Upāy*. He also wrote two allegorical novels, the *Abhedī* and *Ādhyātmikā*. Their style varies between the literary and the colloquial, and bears testimony to the uncertainty still prevailing in Bengali prose style in the third quarter of the century.

Ṭek-châd's greatest follower was Kālīprasanna Siṃha, the celebrated author of *Hutom Pyāchār Naksā* (1862). This was a series of sketches describing social life in contemporary Calcutta and exposing the profligacy and licentiousness of the new-rich Bengali baboo. Kālīprasanna knew manners and social customs well, and he had also a good command of the colloquial tongue. But he was too little concerned with form and style to be a good writer, and was too fond of crude caricature and low buffoonery to be a good satirist. *Hutom Pyāchār Naksā* has some vivid and striking passages, but at its best it is a brilliant lampoon and nothing more. It will not be unfair or uncomplimentary to



Kāliprasanna to say that his greatness lay not so much in his own writings as in the help and encouragement he gave to other authors. He died at the early age of thirty, but in his short life he did many things for the promotion of his native literature and culture. He edited several periodicals, the best of which was the *Vidyotsāhini*, the organ of a cultural society of the same name of which he was the founder. Kāliprasanna was one of the first to recognize the genius of Madhusudan Datta, and he convened a public meeting to honour the poet at a time when Madhusudan was being generally greeted with abuse for the blank verse he introduced into Bengali poetry. When the Reverend James Long, a true friend of the Bengali people, was prosecuted, fined, and imprisoned for having published the English translation of the *Nildarpan*,<sup>1</sup> it was the patriotic and generous Kāliprasanna who gave Long the money to pay the fine. He wrote *Bābu-nāṭak* and several other plays, and translated Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvasi*. The last was acted in Kāliprasanna's house in Calcutta, the translator himself taking a part. His greatest service to his mother tongue was the prose translation of the *Mahābhārata* that was produced under his patronage, and published between 1858 and 1866. A brilliant team of scholars worked on it for many years, and it superseded the translation produced a few years before by the pandits of the Maharaja of Burdwan.<sup>2</sup>

Another writer who should be mentioned here is Rājendralāl Mitra, though he too, like Kāliprasanna Siṃha, belonged neither to the Hindu College nor to the Sanskrit College group. He was a distinguished linguist and antiquary, and his most notable publications were the two miscellanies *Vividhārtha-saṃgraha* and *Rahasya-sandarbhā*. The first of these was started under the auspices of the Vernacular Literature Society, and for learned and thoughtful articles it had no rival in that age except the *Tattwabodhini Patrikā*.

In the second half of the century the development of prose style took place mainly through the novel, which will be noticed in a later section. There was a mass of literature other than the novel, but its average level hardly rose to that of good journalism. Among the best are to be noted the religious and other treatises (*Sāmya*, *Kṛṣṇa-charitra*, *Dharma-tattva*) and the miscellaneous

<sup>1</sup> See p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of both these translations were distributed free by their generous patrons.

essays (*Vividha Prabandha, Lok-rahasya*) of Bankim-chandra Chatterjopādhyāy. Coming from the pen of our greatest novelist these dissertations and essays could not fail to have attractive qualities of style and occasional flashes of original observation, but they also show that Bankim was a somewhat mediocre thinker. Aksay-chandra Sarkār, a follower of Bankim, was well known in that age for his contributions to the *Varigadarsan* and to his own periodicals, the weekly *Sādhārani* and the monthly *Navajivan*. Three more of Bankim's followers deserve mention: Rājkrishna Mukhopādhyāy, noted in that age for his *Prabandhas*; Chandra-nāth Vasu, noted for his *Sakuntalā-tattwa*, *Hindu-tattwa*, and other dissertations; and Purnachandra Vasu, noted for his *Kāvya-sundari*, *Sāhitya-chintā*, and other essays. Kālprasanna Ghos of Dacca was famous as editor of the monthly magazine *Bāndhav* and as author of several volumes of essays under such titles as *Prabhāt-chintā* (Morning Thoughts), *Nisith-chintā* (Night Thoughts), and *Nibhrīta-chintā* (Solitary Thoughts). Whether in the morning or at night, in solitude or in society, his thoughts were always banal and ponderously expressed. In this way he represents one defect from which our literature has rarely been free, just as Chandrasekhar Mukhopādhyāy, the author of *Udbhrānta-prem* (Mad Love), represents another. The popularity enjoyed by *Udbhrānta-prem* can only be explained by the fact that it is an orgy of sentimentality.

It is a relief to turn from these authors, and from many others like them, to Rajanikānta Gupta, whose *Sipāhi Yuddher Itihās* (History of the Sepoy War) is a combination, rare in our language, of good scholarship and good writing. Rajanikānta had a great admiration for ancient Indian civilization and expressed it in several works. Even higher praise is due to Haraprasād Sāstri, one of our best prose writers and one of the greatest scholars of modern India. He wrote many antiquarian, historical, and literary treatises and essays, and two historical tales, the *Kāñchanmālā* and *Bener Meye*. The last is rather a striking piece of historical imagination, quite a vivid reconstruction of Bengali life in the Middle Ages. Praise is also due to Rāmendrasundar Trivedi for his *Prakriti* and other books of essays on popular science.

To turn to the writers on religion and religious philosophy. Many who belong to this group were the product of the Brāhma Samāj. Dwijendranāth Thākūr, a son of Devendranāth Thākūr,

was a member of the Ādi Brāhma Samāj. The *Tattwavidyā* and *Gītāpāṭher Bhumikā* are his best works. The latter is an introduction to the study of the *Gītā*. Kesav-chandra Sen, the leader of the Navavidhān section of the Brāhma Samāj, was an able writer and preacher. Towards the end of the century came the Swāmi Vivekānanda, a disciple of Rāmkrisna Paramahansa, and one of the most inspiring writers and preachers of modern India. He gave an exposition of Yoga philosophy in *Bhakti-yog*, *Jñān-yog* and *Karma-yog*, and wrote many other works. The 'Back to the Upanisads' call of Rāmmohan Rāy had aroused a great interest in the ancient Indian religious systems, and a large part of the scholarship of the period was devoted to the editing and interpreting of the ancient texts. Rames-chandra Datta<sup>1</sup> made an invaluable contribution to the study of the *Rig Veda* by translating it and by issuing a Bengali edition of the *Rig Veda Saṃhitā*. His *Hindu-sāstra*, a compendium of ancient texts with translation and commentary, was also very valuable. Scholarly translations of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* were produced under the patronage of the Maharaja of Burdwan, and the Vaṅgavāsi Press under Yogendrachandra Vasu<sup>2</sup> issued a large number of ancient works in cheap editions.

Mention should also be made of other types of literature. Sañjiv-chandra Chaṭṭopādhāy<sup>3</sup> wrote a charming little travel book called *Pālāmau*, and Sivnāth Sāstri<sup>4</sup> wrote a biography of Rāmtanu Lāhiṛī which is valuable to the student of the social history of Bengal in the nineteenth century. The *Charitāṣṭak* by Kālimay Ghaṭak and the *Nārīcharit* by Saudāmini Siṃha had short lives of famous men and women. There were several autobiographies, e.g. those by Sivnāth Sāstri and Srimati Rāsasundari; but the writers had little of significance to say, and, like many other autobiographers, they made the mistake of supposing that their life would be interesting to their readers because interesting to themselves. Far more valuable were the biographies of Bengali writers that came out in this period: the biographies of Rāmmohan Rāy by Nagendranāth Chaṭṭopādhāy, of Madhusudan Datta by Yogindranāth Vasu, and of Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar by Chandi-charan Vandyopādhāy. These are full-fledged works in the modern style, and represent a great advance upon the biographies of the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 165.

old Bengali poets compiled by Iswar-chandra Gupta earlier in the century.

Finally we should take note of the humorous essays and sketches on social and other topics. The best of this class were: the *Muchirām Guṇer Jīvan-charit* and the *Kamalākānter Daptar* by Baṅkim-chandra Chaṭṭopādhāy; and the *Kalpataru*, *Ksudirām*, and *Pāchu Ṭhākur* by Indranāth Vandyopādhāy. Indranāth relies on buffoonery and fantasy more than Baṅkim does, but he also has the greater comic genius. He often transports us to a most delightful fun-land of absolute nonsense. His only rival is his own follower Trailakyanāth Mukhopādhāy, the author of *Kaṅkāvatī*, *Damarudhar*, *Maṇnā Kothāy*, and other works. *Kaṅkāvatī* is the most delicious blend of folk-lore and social satire, fantasy and realism, and laughter and tears that we have in our language.

Saudāmini Siṃha and Srimati Rāsasundari, whom we have mentioned above, are of special interest as being women. The best Muslim writer of this period, and indeed one of the best of all periods, is Mir Masaraf Ākbar Husain. He touchingly retold the story of the Kārvālā in *Viśādsindhu*, and wrote several other tales and an autobiography.

## (ii) Poetry

The first half of the century, then, was mainly taken up with prose. There was very little poetry, and that little was backward-looking, imitative, and mediocre. The purāṇic and *laukik* deities of old, such as Rām, Kālī, Krisna and Rādhā, continued to supply the inspiration, and the imitation of Bhārat-chandra's style and technique was the order of the day. There was, besides, some imitation of Rāmprasād Sen and the old Vaisnava poets. The popularity of Kheyāl and Ṭappā songs (e.g. those of Nidhu Bābu) continued unabated in the drawing-rooms of the well-to-do, and the Kaviwālās continued to regale the rich and the poor alike. The Pāchālī songs of Dāsarathi Rāy, very popular between 1825 and 1860, were akin to the Kaviwālā, Kheuṛ, Hāp Ākhrāi, and other low forms of entertainment. Another very popular entertainment of the age was the Yātrā (musical drama)<sup>1</sup> on the subject of Vidyā-Sundar. The salacious element in these Yātrās suggests a depraved taste in their patrons.

Apart from Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭāchārya whom we have already

<sup>1</sup> See p. 149.

mentioned,<sup>1</sup> there were but three poets in the years 1800-50 of sufficient importance to deserve mention. Raghunandan Goswāmi made a free version of the *Rāmāyana* in his *Rām-rasāyan*, and wrote a long poem on the Krisna-Rādhā theme entitled *Rādhā-mādhavoday*. Madanmohan Tarkālāṅkāra, the author of *Rasa-taraṅgini* and *Vāsav-dattā*, followed the ornate and artificial manner of later Sanskrit erotic poetry, and had Bhārat-chandra as his immediate model. His most attractive feature is his technical efficiency, and some of his verses, graceful and melodious, are still met, and read with pleasure, in anthologies.

The most important poet of the age was Iswar-chandra Gupta (1812-59),<sup>2</sup> but his importance is historical rather than intrinsic. He wrote agreeably on things of topical and quotidian interest, but did not make his poems art. A journalist by profession, he was a journalist in verse. He often imitated Bhārat-chandra, but was too little an artist to do it well. While Bhārat-chandra was a classicist to his finger-tips, Iswar Gupta derived his characteristic manner from folk-poetry. From that source came the pawky wit and the racy language of the social squibs with which Iswar Gupta achieved a popularity far surpassing that of any other Bengali poet in his lifetime. From folk-poetry, again, came his drollery and doggerel, his clowning and scurrility. One is the less surprised at his coarseness when one remembers that in his younger days he used to take part in the Kheṛ and Hāp Ākhrāi.

As a satirist he found ample material for ridicule in the transitional society of his day, but his ultra-conservative attitude made him laugh at everything that was new or European, irrespective of whether it was good or bad. He had grown up in the old ways, without English education (or regular education of any sort), and his roots were in the old Bengal untouched by Western influence. Yet he lived in an age of rapid westernization, and the first group of westernized Bengali poets had already appeared before his death. His historical position is that of a writer who was cast between two ages, the old and the new, and he is the bridge between the old school of poets whose last great representative was Bhārat-chandra and the new school of poets whose first great representative was Madhusudan. He is the last of the Kaviwālā type of poet, but is not altogether devoid of modernity. A conservative and a traditionalist by nature and upbringing, he none the less kept in touch

<sup>1</sup> See p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 119.

with current affairs and modern movements through his journalistic work. At a time when poets were still following the beaten tracks of devotionism and eroticism, Iswar Gupta struck out a new path by writing on matters of social and public interest and on topical and everyday subjects.

Perhaps the most attractive thing in Iswar Gupta's character was his love of his country, its literature and culture. The patriotic note that runs through his work was altogether new in our literature, and a fertile source of inspiration to younger writers. In the first half of the century there was a grave danger of the anglicized Bengali youth becoming utterly denationalized, and Iswar Gupta was one of the main influences in bringing them back to the national literature and culture. His immense popularity made him the uncrowned king of the literary world, and many younger men<sup>1</sup> took to writing in Bengali under his direction and encouragement. His influence was conservative, and in many ways retrograde, but there was this salutary element in it.

One of the younger writers who clustered round Iswar Gupta and served their literary apprenticeship, so to speak, in the *Samvād Prabhākar* and the monthly *Prabhākar*, was Raṅgalāl Vandyopādhyāy. He was the author of the four narrative poems *Padmini Upākhyān*, *Karma-devi*, *Sura-sundari*, and *Kāñchi-kāveri*. The first, a spirited poem of patriotism and freedom, is on the well-known theme of Padmini, the queen of Chitor, and Ālāuddin Khilji, the emperor of Delhi. The theme is from Rajput history, which henceforth became a happy hunting-ground for Bengali poets, dramatists, and novelists in search of stirring tales of heroism and patriotism. The themes of *Karma-devi* and *Sura-sundari* were also derived from Rajput history. Raṅgalāl never completely threw off Iswar Gupta's influence, and has many old-fashioned elements in his poetry. But he had studied English poetry, and was much influenced by Byron, Scott, and Tom Moore. These, particularly Byron, seem to have been the English poets who were most popular in Bengal of the mid-nineteenth century.

Raṅgalāl is not a poet of a high order, but his *Padmini Upākhyān* is the first poem in our language which can be described as modern. It came out in the same year (1858) as the *Sarmisthā*, our first modern drama, by Madhusudan Datta. Iswar Gupta, the last of the old school of poets, died in 1859, the year which saw the

<sup>1</sup> See p. 120.

publication of Madhusudan's *Tilottamā*. A new era in poetry began with the last, just as a new era in prose had begun with Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar's *Vetāl Pañchaviṃśati* in 1847. The first regular Bengali novel was written by Ṭek-chād Ṭhākur in 1858. The modern movement in literature was thus in full career in the late fifties, and it coincided with the new chapter in political history that began with the Queen's Proclamation (1858) transferring the control of India from the East India Company to the British Crown and Parliament.

Madhusudan Datta (1824-73), the greatest poet between Bhārat-chandra Rāy and Rabindranath Tagore, is undoubtedly the most interesting figure in our history. He was a man of real, though somewhat erratic, genius, and a courageous innovator of forms and types which altered the whole course of our literature and added new dimensions to it. To his adventurous spirit we owe blank verse and the sonnet, our first modern comedy and tragedy, and our first epic. He is the pioneer of our new (i.e. westernized) poetry and our new drama. The heroic note he introduced into Bengali poetry gave it a power and weight, a richness and elevation, it never had before. In his *Meghnād-vadh* and *Virāṅganā* the rustic Bengali muse sometimes spoke the language of Vālmiki and Vyāsa, as well as of Homer, Tasso, and Milton. In introducing blank verse he gave to Bengali poetry a music that was as rich as it was novel; with almost miraculous skill he elicited from the dulcet-toned Bengali *vinā* the deep notes of the Miltonic organ.

He is the earliest, and the greatest, product of Western influence, and represents in his life and work both its happy and its unhappy aspects. It was from English and other European literatures that his main inspiration as a writer came. From the same source also came the themes and modes with which he enlarged the boundaries of Bengali. By virtue of his knowledge of those literatures he had access to a world of ideas and experience far beyond the ken of any Indian before him. But if the most signal merits of his work are to be found in its Western elements, its most signal defects too are to be found there. He often imported those elements with more enthusiasm than discernment, and without full consideration of all the questions connected with their transplantation to the Indian soil. That is why his work is sometimes a hybrid of foreign and native elements whose ultimate fusion, if possible at all, required poetic and critical powers he did

not possess. The East and the West no doubt meet with many happy results in his work, but they also meet superficially. His understanding of Western literature was not so great as his love of it, and he often seems to have cared more for the superficial than for the essential qualities of the things he imported. On those occasions when he is unable to make the originals his own, he remains a second-rate imitator. His superficiality on the Indian side arose from the opposite reason that he did not possess for Indian culture that deep and spontaneous love which is the pre-condition of full understanding. Hyper-westernized and utterly denationalized from early youth, he is the extreme example of the harmful effect that the introduction of English education, and of Western ideas and ways, has had on some Indians. He grew up with a profound hatred of Indian culture and Indian ways, and obsessed with the ambition to distinguish himself by writing in English. It was only after he had been frustrated in that ambition, and at the comparatively late age of thirty-four, that he turned to the pursuit of his mother tongue. With the plays and poems he wrote in Bengali he succeeded in replanting himself on the native soil, but an essential part of him remained alien to the last. In the four years that he devoted to Bengali he realized that only in that language could he produce the best poetry of which he was capable. One would have thought, therefore, that he would have stayed on in Bengal and dug his roots deeper into the native soil. Such, however, was his hankering for Europe that he went and lived there for five years. Earlier he had discarded Hinduism, embraced Christianity, and taken an English wife. His is the tragic case of a man who had his head in India and his heart in England, and who fell between two worlds, the East and the West. But for that fundamental disunity in his consciousness he might have been a far greater poet and a happier man.

Madhusudan had a very unhappy life,<sup>1</sup> though this was in the main due to his inordinate worldly ambition and his careless and improvident ways. The son of a well-to-do lawyer, he was born in the village of Sāgardāri in the district of Jessore. Sāgardāri stands on the river Kapotāksa, lovingly described by the poet as a stream of milk on the breast of his birthplace. At the age of thirteen Madhusudan was sent to the Hindu College, where he remained for six years. Here he formed what turned out to be lifelong friend-

<sup>1</sup> See *Life* (in Bengali) by Yogindranāth Vasu.



ships with the school-friends Gaurdās Basāk, Rājñārāyan Vasu,<sup>1</sup> and Bhudev Mukhopādhāy.<sup>2</sup> Here too he conceived that love for English literature, and for Western ideas and ways, which became his dominating passion. He began to write verse in English, and to dream of coming to England to achieve poetic glory. The following was written at the age of seventeen:

I sigh for Albion's distant shore,  
Its villages green, its mountains high;  
Tho' friends, relations I have none  
In that fair clime, yet oh! I sigh  
To cross the vast Atlantic wave  
For glory or a nameless grave.

He wrote to Gaurdās Basāk the following year: 'Oh! how should I like to see you write my "Life" if I happen to be a great poet, which I am almost sure I shall be if I can go to England.' The desire to go to England had become a fixation, as would appear from a letter written from Tamluk: 'The sea from this place is not very far. What a number of ships have I seen going to England!' The boy had no lack of ambition or courage, and sent poems to *Blackwood's Magazine* and *Bentley's Miscellany*. Byron was the idol of Madhusudan's youth and the dominating influence on his English poetry. 'I am reading Tom Moore's Life of my favourite Byron—a splendid book upon my word.' That was in 1842, but in more mature years Madhusudan went to greater European masters than Byron. Homer, Ovid, Dante, Tasso, and Milton are the poets he mainly draws upon in his Bengali poems. He wrote to Rājñārāyan Vasu: 'I do not think R—— either reads or can appreciate Milton. . . . He reads Byron, Scott, Moore, very nice poets in their way no doubt, but by no means of the highest school of poetry, except, perhaps, Byron now and then. I like Wordsworth better.' At the time of writing *Meghnād-vadh* he admired Milton to the point of idolatry: 'Nothing can be better than Milton. . . . I don't think it impossible to equal Virgil, Kalidas and Tasso. Though glorious, still they are mortal poets. Milton is divine.'

The first act in the tragedy of Madhusudan's life was his conversion to Christianity. It was the beginning of that estrangement from his country and his people which got wider with time. It was also the beginning of his financial troubles, because of the strain that now sprang up in his relations with his father on whom

<sup>1</sup> See p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 127.

he had been so long dependent. The conversion was for Madhusudan one of the ways of westernizing himself, and had little to do with religious conviction. Obsessed as he was with the desire to go to England, he thought it would be easier to fulfil that desire if he became a Christian. The missionaries who converted him were as astute as they were unscrupulous. They observed the strictest secrecy, and they even kept the boy (he was nineteen then) under military guard in Fort William, lest his father, who was a man of means and influence, got wind of the matter and tried to rescue him. It was customary for converts to take a Christian name, and Michael was the one chosen for Madhusudan. He now joined Bishop's College where he could get free education as a Christian, but got into trouble with the authorities for wearing the college cap, a privilege not allowed to non-European students. The teachers at the Hindu College had stimulated his love of literature, and now in Bishop's College he developed an interest in languages. He retained that interest all his life, in the course of which he studied no less than twelve languages: Bengali, English, Persian, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, German, and Italian.

In 1848 Madhusudan went to Madras in search of a livelihood, and lived there for eight years, maintaining himself precariously by teaching and journalism. He married an Englishwoman, separated from her, and married another Englishwoman. His second marriage was very happy, and lasted until husband and wife died within a few days of each other. The second wife was an excellent woman, but the unfortunate part of the marriage was that it further alienated Madhusudan from Indian society. The year after his arrival in Madras he put forth the *Captive Ladie*, his most considerable English poem. The poem's cool reception in some quarters put a salutary check to Madhusudan's most-cherished ambition. However creditable a performance for a non-Englishman, the *Captive Ladie* is third-rate work by English standards, and gives no indication that Madhusudan would have been anything more than a third-rate poet had he continued to write in English. Returning to Calcutta as poor as when he had left it, Madhusudan took a post as clerk, and then as interpreter, in the police court.

Madhusudan became a Bengali writer almost by accident. The rajas Iswar-chandra Siṃha and Pratāp-chandra Siṃha of Pāikpārā

were about to stage a Bengali play<sup>1</sup> in their private theatre at Belgāchhiyā, and Madhusudan was asked to prepare an English translation of it. Copies of the translation were to be given to the English friends of the rajas to enable them to follow the performance. At one of the rehearsals Madhusudan remarked to his friend Gaurdās Basāk what a pity it was that the rajas should spend so much money on such a poor play. On his friend saying that it was not possible to find a good play in Bengali, Madhusudan replied with his characteristic impulsiveness, 'A good play? Why, I will write one.' No one could have imagined him capable of writing anything in Bengali in those days. As a student at the Hindu College he used to say that it was better to forget Bengali, and he had almost forgotten it since. We know from his letters that while in Madras 'he was losing his Bengali faster than he could mention', and that he could not write to his father about the birth of his daughter because 'he did not know how to do the thing in Bengali'. None the less *Sarmis̥thā* appeared in 1858, and was performed with great pomp and success at Belgāchhiyā theatre the following year. It is not a good play, but is important as the first Bengali work by Madhusudan and as the first Bengali play to be constructed in the modern Western style. Madhusudan knew that *Sarmis̥thā* would be disliked by the traditionalists, but was quite unperturbed about it.

What care you [he wrote to Gaurdās Basāk], if there be a foreign air about the thing [*Sarmis̥thā*]? Do you dislike Moore's poetry because it is full of orientalism, Byron's poetry for its Asiatic air, Carlyle's prose for its Germanism? Besides, remember that I am writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with western ideas and modes of thinking; and that it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration of everything Sanskrit.

To Rājñārāyan Vasu he wrote: 'If I live to write other dramas . . . I shall look to the great dramatists of Europe for models.'

The above passages show the new spirit in Bengali literature, the spirit of which Madhusudan was the first and the most effective expression. It was the spirit of innovation and experiment, of replacing the old by the new, of breaking away from native traditions and adopting foreign standards. Madhusudan now sat down

<sup>1</sup> This was the *Ratnāvali*, translated from Sanskrit by Rāmñārāyan Tarkaratna (see p. 150).

to write more plays ('Now that I have got the taste of blood, I am at it again'), and finished three in quick succession. As he said in a letter at this time, *Padmāvati* (1859) was based on the story of Paris offering the apple of discord to Venus. Because of the similarity that there is between Greek and Indian mythology, the Greek gods and goddesses have easily slipped into the Indian garbs Madhusudan has given them. Then came the two social comedies *Ekei ki Bale Sabhyatā* and *Buro Sāliker Ghāre Rô*. The follies and vices of young Bengal were ridiculed in the first, and those of the older generation were ridiculed in the second. None of these plays has any particular merit, but they helped the new Bengali drama to grow. What is more important, they indicated to Madhusudan the path of his life. They made him realize that, being a Bengali, he could best fulfil his genius by writing in Bengali. They rescued him from the self-imposed isolation in which he had so long courted a foreign muse, and they restored him to his natural environment.

He now worked with amazing industry, like a man whose spirits had at last been fully released. *Tilottamā*, his first Bengali poem, had already appeared in 1859. It is based on the purāṇic story of the war waged on the gods by the demon brothers Sunda and Upasunda. Defeated and dispossessed, the gods create the beautiful Tilottamā and send her down to Vindya forest. The brothers fall in love with her and kill each other. The story is Indian, but Madhusudan retold it in European style. His description of the defeated gods shows him to have read *Hyperion*, and his newly created Tilottamā is reminiscent of Milton's newly created Eve. The poem has many faults, but it enabled Madhusudan to get his hand in for the supreme effort of *Meghnād-vadh*. Madhusudan was aware of its lack of human interest,<sup>1</sup> and of what he called the 'roughish elevation' of its language and versification. For the contemporary Bengali reader its most exciting feature was the blank verse.

The idea of introducing blank verse had germinated in a conversation with Mahārājā Yatindramohan Thākur. The Mahārājā was sceptical about its suitability, and gave as his reason the fact that blank verse had not been a success even in French, a

<sup>1</sup> 'The want of what is called "human interest" will no doubt strike you at once, but you must remember that it is a story of Gods and Titans, and I could not by any means shove in men and women' (Letter to Rājñārāyan Vasu).

language much more developed than Bengali. To that the enthusiastic Madhusudan replied that Bengali was the daughter of Sanskrit, and nothing was impossible for the child of such a mother. He added that he would prove that he was right by himself composing a Bengali poem in blank verse, and the Mahārājā said that he would have the poem published at his own expense if Madhusudan's efforts were successful. In saying that Bengali was the daughter of Sanskrit Madhusudan probably had in mind the fact that Sanskrit verse was unrhymed. But the essence of blank verse is not so much the rhymelessness as the carrying on of the sense from line to line, and the variation of the rhythm by shifting the medial caesura; and for these Madhusudan was indebted to Milton. He took the standard fourteen-syllable line of the Bengali Payār and brought it as close as he could to the Miltonic model. He also emulated to the best of his powers the dignity and sublimity, the grand style, of Milton. The blank-verse passages he had tentatively introduced into the prose of *Padmāvatī* seem to have passed unnoticed, but a storm of censure and ridicule broke over his head on the appearance of *Tilottamā*. That poem was written entirely in blank verse, and so were the two later poems *Meghnād-vadh* and *Virāṅganā*. The later poems silenced the critics and detractors, and permanently established the vogue of blank verse in our literature. Some of Madhusudan's readers were honestly puzzled by the novel and alien-sounding Amitrāksar Chhanda (as blank verse was called in Bengali), but most of the criticism came from blind conservative prejudice. Madhusudan faced his critics courageously and never lost faith in his ultimate victory. 'The prevalence of blank verse in this country is simply a question of time,' he wrote to Rājñārāyan Vasu in 1860. His prophecy was fulfilled sooner than he expected, and within a year he wrote to the same friend, 'Even the stiff pandits are beginning to unbend. . . . Blank verse is the "go" now.' There can be no doubt that Madhusudan's innovation was as epoch-making an event in Bengali literature as Marlowe's mighty line was in English. Freed from the age-old fetters of the Payār, from the monotony of its fixed pauses and jingling rhymes, our poetry henceforth assumed a new life, a new beauty and power.

That does not mean, though, that Madhusudan's handling of the new measure was altogether above censure. He was often harsh and discordant, verbose and noisy, involved and obscure.

He distorted words at pleasure and courted dignity by using an inflated and periwigged style. The influence of Milton was not altogether salutary, if one considers how artificial Madhusudan became in straining after Miltonic grandeur. Like many English followers of Milton he was more successful in imitating Milton's defects than his merits. A certain heightening is indeed necessary to epic and heroic poetry, but the epic and heroic character of *Meghnād-vadh* and *Virāṅganā* would only partly account for the unnaturalness of style and diction that one not infrequently finds in those poems. The explanation is rather to be found in the impetuosity and self-indulgence that characterized Madhusudan as a man and a writer. As the reader will have gathered from the excerpts from some of the letters quoted above, Madhusudan's great gifts of enthusiasm and initiative were not tempered by judgement, and he was too self-satisfied by nature to consider what he did or wrote in a detached and critical spirit. To give an example: he was so highly pleased with himself as the pioneer of blank verse that he seems to have lost sight of the fact that in an unaccented language like Bengali blank verse can never be anything better than the shadow of what it is in English. The following excerpt from a letter offers another good example of how completely his critical judgement could be eclipsed by over-enthusiasm:

I need scarcely tell you that the blank form of verse is the best suited for poetry in every language. A true poet will always succeed best in blank verse as a bad one in rhyme. The grace and beauty of the former's thoughts will claim attention as the melody of the latter will conceal the poverty of his mind. Besides, a truly noble mind will always wither away under restraint, of whatever description that restraint may be.

By condemning rhyme—as he appears to be doing in this passage—Madhusudan condemns half the world's poetry. One would have liked to know what he would have said of his own *Vrajāṅganā* and sonnets.

Fundamentally alienated though Madhusudan was from his native culture, he nevertheless had two real affinities with it. One was his love of Krittivās, Kāsirām Dās, and some other old Bengali poets, and the other was his love of Indian mythology. 'Though as a jolly Christian youth I don't care a pin's head for Hinduism, I love the grand mythology of our ancestors. It is full of poetry. A fellow with an inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful

things out of it.’<sup>1</sup> *Tilottamā* was derived from Indian mythology, and *Meghnād-vadh*, Madhusudan’s masterpiece, was based on an episode of the *Rāmāyana*. But the latter poem was more Greek than Indian:

It is my ambition to engraft the exquisite graces of the Greek mythology on our own. In the present poem [*Meghnād-vadh*] I mean to give free scope to my inventing powers (such as they are) and to borrow as little as I can from Vālmiki. Do not let this startle you. You shan’t have to complain again of the un-Hindu character of the poem. I shall not borrow Greek stories, but write, rather try to write, as a Greek would have done.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing could show better the tragic side of Western influence than that an Indian engaged in an epic should lay aside Vālmiki and should wish to write like a Greek. The passage also shows how uncritical and superficial Madhusudan’s enthusiasms could be. Greek mythology had a spiritual reality for a Greek which it never could have for anyone else.

Nor has Madhusudan actually succeeded in writing as a Greek would have written (that would indeed have been beyond his power), or in doing anything more than borrow some episodes from Homer and imitate his general heroic spirit. Rām’s descent into hell is derived from Homer, as is the machinery of the gods and goddesses taking part in the war between Rām and Rāvan. Madhusudan goes to Tasso, Milton, and some other poets besides Homer, and skilfully assembles the materials he collects from many sources into an organic whole. He was perfectly justified in saying<sup>1</sup> that he had constructed *Meghnād-vadh* on the most rigid principles, and even a French critic would not find fault with it. He safeguarded the heroic character of his poem by keeping it completely clear of religion—a great achievement when we remember that all the vernacular versions of Sanskrit epics and semi-epics before him had been religious in character. The Bhakti element had even crept into the original *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* and destroyed their heroic character. *Meghnād-vadh* has some fine lyric passages (e.g. Sitā’s description of her life in Pañchavaṭī) and some passages of spirited action (most notably in the seventh canto). It is the first and the greatest epic in our language, though this is not to say that it is a great epic. Its heroic character is somewhat softened by the pathetic note with which it

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Rājnarāyan Vasu.

begins and ends, and its poetry is often spoilt by turgid rhetoric and declamation. Some of its most serious flaws were gratuitously introduced by Madhusudan through his wilful disrespect for Indian culture. Its theme is the killing of Meghnād by Laksman in the war between Rāvan (Meghnād's father) and Rām (Laksman's brother). Meghnād is the hero, and to elevate him and Rāvan Madhusudan has wantonly degraded Rām and Laksman. 'I despise Rām and his rabble, but the idea of Rāvan elevates and kindles my imagination.'<sup>1</sup> Rām and Laksman are two of the noblest figures in Indian mythology, but in Madhusudan's poem they are utterly devoid of valour and honour. It is open to question whether so unorthodox an attitude towards the national tradition is justified in an epic poet; the world's greatest epic poets have exalted their national idols. In any case the degradation of Rām and Laksman has not really served Madhusudan's purpose of elevating Rāvan and Meghnād; that purpose would have been best served if he had matched them against heroes worthy of their steel. In the *Rāmāyana* Meghnād is killed in the battlefield and in fair fight, but in Madhusudan's poem he is unarmed and engaged in worship in a temple when Laksman appears clad in celestial armour and kills him in cold blood. Before his death Meghnād throws a cup at Laksman who swoons at the blow. We wonder whether we are reading a heroic or a mock-heroic poem.

The years 1861-2 were Madhusudan's most fruitful period. They were the years of publication of *Meghnād-vadh*, *Krisnakumāri*, *Vrajāṅganā*, and *Virāṅganā*. They are also the years when Western influence was most operative, as all the above-mentioned works except *Vrajāṅganā* were written on Western models. *Krisnakumāri* was based on an incident in Rajput history, and is the first tragedy in our language. *Vrajāṅganā*, a long lyric on the Krisna-Rādhā theme, is the only work by Madhusudan which is entirely in the native tradition. Except for a few passages here and there the poem does not come to life, and is on the whole a dull reproduction of the conventionalities of Krisna-Rādhā poetry. *Virāṅganā* was modelled on Ovid's heroic epistles, and contains some of Madhusudan's finest blank verse. Technically it is his best work.

In the four years since he had begun to write in Bengali, Madhusudan had produced five plays and three poems. He had also

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Rājñārāyan Vasu.



conceived the idea of a new epic and had made the preliminary plans for a new play. He had acquired fame and an honourable position in the country, and, most important of all, had come to realize that his self-fulfilment lay through his mother tongue. 'I had no idea', he wrote to Rājñārāyan Vasu in 1861, 'that our mother-tongue would place at my disposal such exhaustless materials. . . . The thoughts and images bring out words with themselves, words that I never thought I knew.' And to Gaurdās Basāk at a later date:

There is nothing like cultivating and enriching our mother tongue. . . . I pray God that the noble ambition of Milton to do something for his mother tongue and his native land may animate all men of talent among us. If there be anyone among us anxious to leave a name behind him, and not pass away into oblivion like a brute, let him devote himself to his mother tongue. That is his legitimate sphere, his proper element. . . . Let those who feel that they have springs of fresh thought in them fly to their mother tongue. . . . Our Bengali is a very beautiful language, it only wants men of genius to polish it up. Such of us, as owing to early defective education know little of it and have learnt to despise it, are miserably wrong. It is, or rather, it has the elements of a great language in it.

His father having died in the meantime, Madhusudan had inherited sufficient means to live in reasonable comfort in his own country and to devote himself to his mother tongue. But his inordinate worldly ambition and his lifelong hankering for England did not let him do that, and in 1862 he came to England with the object of qualifying himself for the Bar. His extravagant ways of living and his lack of practical wisdom involved him in grave financial troubles in England and France, but he was saved by the generosity of his Indian friends, particularly Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar. Returning to Calcutta in 1867 he commenced practice as a barrister, but proved a failure. His careless habits continued, and the rest of his life is a story of increasing suffering for himself and his wife and children. Homeless, destitute, and ill, he died in a charitable hospital in 1873. While in Europe he had written his book of sonnets which in many ways is his most satisfying work. The sonnet form had a happy restraining influence on his characteristic tendency towards exuberance. His last works were the prose *Hekṭar-vadh* and the play *Māyā-kānan*.

'I shall come out like a tremendous comet,' Madhusudan had

written to Rājñārāyan Vasu in 1861, describing himself more aptly than he knew. He was an alien star, a brief and brilliant wanderer into our literary firmament. The importation of foreign ideas and modes was his greatest achievement, and the best thing about his poetry is its wide, almost world-wide, cultural affiliation. His innovations are more remarkable than his intrinsic qualities, and he is greater in the traditions which he started than in the poetry which he himself produced. With all its merits *Meghnād-vādh* is a brilliant experiment rather than a great poem.

The disappearance of the oral tradition as the result of the widespread use of the printing press in the nineteenth century had a salutary effect on the form of Bengali poetry. Poems were no longer meant to be sung or chanted (except when specially composed as words for music), but to be read and recited; and as they shed their primitive song-character they became what we should properly call poems. The absence of accent in the Bengali language, and the *mātrāvṛitta* (moraic) system of Bengali versification, would never allow Bengali poetry to be as independent of music as, for instance, English poetry is. But within that natural limitation poetry now had all possible freedom to live its own life, to develop in the light of its own laws of prosody, and to explore to the full its own resources of metrical and verbal beauty. New verse-forms were invented and variations were introduced in the old verse forms. For this the stimulus and the models came from English poetry, just as the stimulus and the models for the new Bengali prose had come from English prose. Blank verse, the greatest formal innovation of the nineteenth century, was taken up by Madhusudan's contemporaries and successors and given a naturalness it lacked at its origin. A modified form of it, brought nearer to the spoken language, was used very successfully by Girishchandra Ghos<sup>1</sup> for his plays, and obtained wide vogue on the Bengali stage. Another notable innovator was Vihārīlāl Chakravarti, whose exquisite lyric measures have earned him the name of the father of the modern Bengali lyric. Rabindranath Tagore was influenced by Vihārīlāl, and introduced many novel verse-forms. The sonnet became quite a popular form after it had been introduced by Madhusudan Datta.

Among Madhusudan's contemporaries and successors we should note Krisnachandra Majumdār, the author of some popular songs,

<sup>1</sup> See p. 151.

and of some religious and didactic poems of which the *Sadbhāv-satak* is the best. Vihārīlāl Chakravartti, mentioned above for his formal experiments, wrote several volumes of verse, e.g. *Vaṅgasundari*, *Sādhur Āsan*, and *Sāradā-maṅgal* (the best). He is inward-looking and subjective, but has little of significance to communicate. Somewhat similar is Surendranāth Majumdār, the author of *Mahilā Kāvya*. The work of Hem-chandra Vandyopādhyāy, the best poet between Madhusudan Datta and Rabindranath Tagore, is more solid and various: *Britra-saṁhār*, the best epic in our language after *Meghnād-vadh*; *Chhāyāmayi*, a reflective poem based on Dante's *Divina Commedia*; adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*; *Dasamahāvīdyā*, an original play; and several volumes of lyric, patriotic, and comic verse. The lyrics are conventional in sentiment, but have considerable technical skill. The patriotic poems, full of fire and feeling and widely known, are among the best things called forth by the nascent nationalism of the eighties and nineties. Hem-chandra is as happy in comic as in serious verse, as accomplished a practitioner of the familiar as of the formal style. In some of his occasional and topical poems he is as colloquial and satirical as Iswar Gupta, but is altogether more enjoyable. Navin-chandra Sen is dull and trite in his serious and reflective moods, but is not without descriptive and narrative power. *Palāsir Yuddha*, a long poem on the Battle of Plassey, is his best work. *Amritābha* is a poem on the Buddha, and *Raivatak*, *Kuruksetra*, and *Prabhās* form a trilogy on Krishna. He also wrote a poem on the Christ entitled *Khrīṣṭa*. Foremost among the many women writers was Kāmini Rāy, the author of *Ālo o Chhāyā*. Mānkumāri achieved wide popularity with her *Kusumāñjali*, and so did Girindramohini with her *Asrukanā*. But their work, like that of the majority of men and women poets of the period, rarely rises above the level of magazine verse.

### (iii) Drama

The Bengali drama and theatre are importations from the West. After the death of Sanskrit drama India had no drama for many centuries, partly because the Muslim rulers were not fond of it and did not patronize it. Drama relies on patronage more than any other form of art, and the end of Hindu rule meant the virtual death of the ancient Indian drama. The dramatic instinct of the people precariously kept itself alive with such rustic and semi-

dramatic entertainments as the Yātrā of Bengal. The Yātrā used no stage, scenery, or curtain, and was originally a musical performance accompanied with miming and dancing. The performance took place on a square-shaped arena surrounded by the audience. Either dialogue was absent, or bits of it were improvised by the actors in between the singing. The subject-matter of the plays consisted of purānic or semi-purānic stories of gods and goddesses, and Krisna as the most popular Hindu deity practically monopolized the repertoire. More dialogue was introduced in later years, as were secular subjects, such as the story of Vidyā-Sundar, but the essential character of the Yātrā remained musical as before. A folk-art of the most primitive type, the Yātrā was incapable of satisfying the taste of the new-risen *bourgeoisie* of the nineteenth century, and was rapidly superseded by the new drama imported from the West. The new drama owed nothing to the Yātrā, but in its turn it too had to cater for the popular love of music. The tradition of having songs in plays, including tragedies, persists to the present day, and the songs are as numerous as they are dramatically irrelevant.

An English theatre had been built in Calcutta in 1756, and others had followed, creating a taste for similar performances in Bengali among the enlightened sections of the people. In 1795-6 a Russian adventurer named Herasim Lebedoff put on two Bengali plays, both translations from English, in a theatre he had built in Calcutta. So far as is known, these were the earliest Bengali plays to be seen on the stage. A private theatre was built by Prasanna-kumār Tagore in 1831-2, but no Bengali plays are known to have been acted there. In 1833 there was a performance of a dramatized version of Bhārat-chandra's *Vidyā-Sundar* in a private theatre belonging to Navin-chandra Vasu in Syāmbājār, Calcutta. The growth of the drama was retarded by the lack of plays, and we have to wait until the middle of the century before we hear of such pieces as the *Ratnāvali* by Nilmani Pāl, the *Bhadrārjjun* by Tārā-chād Sīkdār, the *Abhijñān-Sakuntal* by Nandakumār Rāy, the *Bābu-nāṭak* by Kaliprasanna Siṃha,<sup>1</sup> and the *Bhānumati-Chittavilās*<sup>2</sup> by Harachandra Ghos. These were poor pieces, hardly deserving to be called plays, and their subject-matter was mostly derived from Sanskrit.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> This was based on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

The new drama received the patronage of wealthy persons such as the Mahārājā Yatindramohan Tagore of Pāthuriyāghāṭā and the Rājās Iswar-chandra Siṃha and Pratāp-chandra Siṃha of Pāikpārā, and its history properly begins in 1857, when the *Kulin-kul-sarvaswa*, an original social play by Rāmnārāyan Tarkaratna, was acted. Rāmnārāyan wrote four original plays, of which *Nava-nāṭak* was the best, and he translated several Sanskrit plays. One of these translations was the *Ratnāvali*, which set Madhusudan Datta on the path of play-writing.<sup>1</sup> Rāmnārāyan was a Sanskrit pandit, and followed the canons of Sanskrit drama. But Madhusudan wrote in the modern European style, and that is the style which has since obtained on the Bengali stage. Thus Madhusudan is rightly regarded as the father of Bengali drama. Of the six plays Madhusudan wrote, the tragedy of *Kṛṣṇakumāri* is the best. The social comedies *Ekei ki Bale Sabhyatā* and *Buṛo Sāliker Ghāre Rō* are not without enjoyable qualities.

Then came Dinabandhu Mitra, a better dramatist on the whole than his predecessors. He was most successful in his farces, such as *Ĵāmāi Bārik*, *Viyepāglā Buṛo*, and *Sadhavār Ekādasi*. In these he could freely indulge in the crude and crazy mirth of which he had a great store. His serious plays, e.g. *Nildarpan*, *Lilāvati*, and *Navin Tapaswini*, are far from satisfactory. Their plots are muddled, their characters are unreal, and their dialogue is lifeless and unnatural. *Navin Tapaswini* comes to life only in the comic scenes where Jaladhar, based on Shakespeare's Falstaff, appears. The materials of *Nildarpan* were excellent, and chosen with a true dramatist's instinct, but Dinabandhu lacked the art to make a good play out of them. The play was about the oppression of Bengali villagers by the English indigo planters, and it created a great sensation when it first appeared in 1860. An English translation by Madhusudan Datta, but without the translators' name, was published by the Reverend James Long, and copies of it were sent to influential people in India and England. The indigo planters, backed by the European community of Calcutta, instituted criminal proceedings, and Long was fined and imprisoned.

Among the many playwrights who succeeded Dinabandhu, we shall have space only for the most outstanding. Manomohan Vasu, the author of *Rāmābhisek*, *Sati-nāṭak*, *Haris-chandra*, and other plays, mainly dealt with purāṇic themes. Jyotirindranāth

<sup>1</sup> See p. 140.

Thākur's *Asrumati* and Rājkrishna Rāy's *Prahlād-charitra* deserve passing mention. Giris-chandra Ghos<sup>1</sup> (1844-1911), the most important figure in the history of Bengali drama, was a first-rate actor, theatre manager, and producer besides being a playwright. In his lifelong association with the drama he founded several playhouses and trained several dozens of actors and actresses. Before him female parts were usually taken by men, and plays were acted by amateur companies in private theatres belonging to the rich. Giris-chandra put actresses permanently on the stage, and in 1867 founded the first public theatre in Bengal. Drama henceforth became self-supporting, and its future life was assured. In the past it was a plaything of the wealthy and upper classes, but now it became a democratic and national art. Giris-chandra's achievements in the theatre movement were great, but they served merely as a background to his work as playwright. This consisted of about eighty plays and several hundred songs. He was equally adept at drawing tears and laughter, and ranged over a wide variety of types. The following is a brief selection: mythological plays (*Janā, Pāṇḍav-gaurav, Pāṇḍaver Ajñātavās, Tapoval*); historical plays (*Mir Kāsim, Sirājuddaulā, Chhatrapati, Asok*); social plays (*Praphulla, Validān, Hārānidhi, Sāsti ki Sānti*); religious plays (*Buddha-dev, Bilwamaṅgal, Saṅkarāchārya, Chaitanya-līlā*); musical comedies (*Alādin, Abu Hosen, Yāysā kā Tāysā*); and farces (*Bellik Bājār*). He dramatized Madhusudan Datta's *Meghnād-vadh* and several novels of Bankim-chandra Chatterpādhyāy, and made a good acting version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. His original plays were good entertainment, but old-fashioned and unadventurous in theme and technique. Anxious to turn out popular successes, he wrote down to the audience. The same is true of Amritalāl Vasu, another actor-dramatist. Though on a lower level than Giris-chandra, he too wrote many plays and quarried many veins. He was most successful in farces, such as *Bābu, Vivāha-bibhrāt, and Khās Dakhal*. Dinabandhu and Giris-chandra, and even Amritalāl, give indications of potentialities which might have been realized in a country with a greater tradition of drama. As it is, their best work is never better than second-rate. But a first-rate dramatist is yet to be born in Bengal. The drama we have had to the present day hardly deserves the name, so primitive is its sense of action, character, and dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 147.

(iv) *The Novel*

Like the drama the novel was a gift of the West. Before the nineteenth century the Indian classical and vernacular literatures had the romance, the tale, and the fable, but the modern social and historical novel, with emphasis on manners and psychology, was the direct outcome of Western influence. The novel took root with surprising ease and rapidity in Bengal, and yielded a large crop in the period under review. *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl*, the first Bengali novel, appeared in 1857, and in 1865 appeared the *Durges-nandini*, the first novel by Baṅkim-chandra Chaṭṭopādhyāy. Since then the novel has become the most flourishing form of our literature.

Baṅkim-chandra Chaṭṭopādhyāy (1838-94), the greatest Bengali novelist and the founder of the modern school of Indian fiction, was born in the village of Kāṭālpārā near Naihāṭi, and educated at Hooghly College and Presidency College. He was one of the first graduates of the newly founded Calcutta University, and took his B.A. degree in 1858. In the same year he was appointed Deputy Collector under the Government, an office which he held with great credit until retirement. He was as high-spirited as he was competent, and always came off victorious in the many conflicts he had with his superior officers. His early literary efforts were in undistinguished verse of the Iswar Gupta school, and some of these were published in the *Samvād Prabdhākar*. In 1853 he put forth the two volumes of poems entitled *Lalitā* and *Mānasi*, but after this Baṅkim wisely discarded poetry for fiction. He shared the contemporary craze for writing in English, and *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), his first novel, was in that language. He again showed his wisdom by abandoning English, and by writing his next novel in Bengali.

The appearance of *Durges-nandini* was an epoch-making event in our literature. The reader of to-day, far from finding any great merit in that novel, is painfully aware of its many shortcomings; but for the reader of 1865 it was a source of unprecedented delight. It was the first Bengali novel in the modern European style, and the first work of creative imagination in Bengali prose. It was immensely superior to *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* in every respect, and had a sense of form, and a human interest, not found in our literature before. Our entire stock of fiction had hitherto consisted of

a few medieval tales and fables, and these, again, were mostly derived from Sanskrit or Persian. Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar's *Sitār Vanavās* was the best prose work before 1865, but it retold the story of a Sanskrit drama, and was not an original creation. No wonder, therefore, that *Durges-nandini* and the later novels of Baṅkim opened up a new world of beauty to the Bengali people. The effect created by *Durges-nandini* was greater, we are told, than the effect created by *Meghnād-vadh*. Rabindranath Tagore compared<sup>1</sup> its appearance in our literature to the coming of dawn after night.

Baṅkim's art was born almost full-formed, and in the next thirteen years novels poured from his pen in quick succession, at the average rate of one a year. *Kapāl-kundalā*, his most imaginative tale, came out in 1866, and was followed by *Mrinālīni*, a novel with twelfth-century Bengal as its background. In 1872 Baṅkim founded the *Vaṅgadarsan*, and many of his later novels were first published serially in that magazine: *Visavriksa* (his first social novel), *Indirā*, *Yugalāṅguriya*, *Chandrasekhar*, *Rajani*, and *Rādhārāni* before 1875; and *Krisnakānter Will*, *Rājsimha*, *Ānanda-maṭh*, and *Devi Chaudhurāni* between 1875 and 1882. His last novel, *Sitārām*, appeared in 1888 in a magazine called *Prachār*. In addition he wrote several volumes of miscellaneous essays, dissertations, and sketches which we have already noticed.<sup>2</sup> From 1872 until his death Baṅkim had no peer among contemporary writers, and was the undisputed monarch of the literary world. Other writers of the nineteenth century and after have been admired more, but no one, not even Rabindranath Tagore, has come so close to the heart of the Bengali people. Another thing that endeared Baṅkim to his countrymen was his patriotism. He is one of our earliest nationalists, eager for the revival of Hinduism and for the restoration of Hindu rule in India. The famous nationalist song 'Bande Mātaram' is from his pen (it appeared in *Ānanda-maṭh*), and the struggle of Hindus for political freedom is the theme of several of his novels.

Baṅkim has been the most widely read author of the last fifty years, and has received the highest praise from his readers and critics both as a novelist and a stylist. His popularity and influence have spread over the whole of India, and he is permanently enthroned as a classic. The time is ripe for a proper critical inquiry

<sup>1</sup> In *Ādhunik Sāhitya*.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 130-1, 133.



into his work, one that will take full note of his shortcomings and will not be a reiteration of the customary eulogy. Such an inquiry will not only enable us to understand him better than has been possible so far; it will give us an idea of the shortcomings of his imitators and followers, and indeed of the entire school of Bengali fiction of which until recently he was the sole inspiration and model. While it is our duty to praise him as the creator of the Bengali novel, it is equally our duty to indicate the false values he bequeathed to it. The truth about Bankim, as the present writer sees it, is that he is a very mediocre novelist. He was the pioneer of a new form of art rather than a good artist, the father of the modern Indian novel rather than a good novelist. If any further apology be needed for speaking freely of his faults, it will be found in the good reason that they do not affect the importance of the part he played in the development of the novel. His faults, again, are in a large measure traceable to the age in which he lived, to its bad standards and lack of standards. Not only were there no novels worth the name when he began to write, there was not even a well-established prose style. He had to create his own standards, or to import them from the English novels he had read. His defects are the birth-pangs of the Bengali novel, and in speaking of them the present writer does not forget the unfavourable conditions in which he worked.

Eight of Bankim's novels have an historical background and make use of historical persons and events, but none of them can be called an historical novel. The reason for this does not lie, as has been commonly supposed, in Bankim's variations from historical facts or even in his distortions of them. As a rule he is fairly true to facts, and his variations and distortions are neither many nor serious. Typical examples are found in *Ananda-math* where Bankim makes Birbhum the scene of battles which actually took place in north Bengal, and calls by the name of Major Wood a British officer whose real name was Captain Edwards. In the preface to the third edition of *Ananda-math*, after referring to these inaccuracies, Bankim justifies himself by saying: 'I do not consider these discrepancies fatal. A novel is a novel, not a history.' The justification was not really necessary, and Bankim might have spared us the truism about a novel being a novel. Accuracy is desirable, but no one would cavil at inaccuracies so trivial as these. No one with any literary sense would suppose that a faithful

reproduction of facts would by itself make an historical novel. No historical novelist worth the name would interpret his art so narrowly as to forget the elementary principle that a novel is not a history.

One would have liked to think that in statements like these Baṅkim was expressing a wide view of the novel, but the unfortunate truth is that he was expressing a narrow view of history. The first chapter of the third part of *Sitārām* opens thus: 'Bhusnā was occupied. Sitārām was victorious in the battle. Torāb Khā met his death at Mrinmay's hands. These are historical matters, consequently of little importance to us, and we shall not spend our time in describing them in detail. A novelist should concern himself with inner matters, not with history.' No further evidence need be given of Baṅkim's unintelligent and unimaginative attitude to history. As history is a record of human actions, it provides excellent examples of those 'inner matters' with which a novelist should concern himself; and that is precisely the reason why many of the world's greatest novelists and dramatists have gone to history for their material. Baṅkim should also have known that to revive the past is almost as miraculous a performance as to revive the dead, and is the highest performance of which a novelist is capable. He himself went to history for more than half of his novels—one wonders why, if he really thought that historical matters were of little interest to a novelist.

In view of the use he made of history, however, one could safely surmise that he would have done better to have left it alone. The 'history' in his novels is just so much adventitious, unreal, and dead matter. Nowhere, not even in *Rājsimha* which he expressly called an historical novel, does he show the least awareness that there is such a thing as the life or spirit of history, let alone make any attempt to capture it. The characters are not the historical persons whose names they bear; they are undefined figures who, but for the context of events in which they appear, might be anybody or nobody. Baṅkim is equally disappointing about the incidents. He shows no curiosity about the political, economic, or social forces that brought them about, and is content to regard them as mere incidents. Quite often he records them in the manner of a schoolboy jotting down history notes. 'Bhusnā was occupied. Sitārām was victorious in the battle. Torāb Khā met his death at Mrinmay's hands.' Baṅkim, as we said above, is

usually true to facts, but the bare bones of facts are all that he gives. The living breath of history escapes him, and that is why he is no historical novelist. His works are not even good period pieces, and have no value whatsoever as pictures of the manners and customs of the past. He was influenced by Scott, and was a romantic like him, and yet he could be peculiarly insensitive to the picturesque in history. *Kapāl-kunḍalā* is an instance. In *Rāj-simha*, another story of Mogul times, he had a rare opportunity for a pageant of superb magnificence, but could not fully rise to it. *Rājsimha* is more historical than the other novels, though Nirmalkumāri, a fictitious character, has a place in the centre of the stage.

In the other novels the historical matter merely pads out the main story or supplies a vague background. In *Chandrasekhar* the story of Mir Kāsim and Dalani has been most artificially hitched to the story of Saivalini and her husband and lover, and the historical part of *Kapāl-kunḍalā* is utterly irrelevant to its main story. The historical matter of *Mrinālīni*, viz. the conquest of Bengal by the Muslims, clashes with the romantic story of the heroine's search for her husband. The heroine is conceived after the Rādhā of the Vaisnava Pads, and some of those Pads are actually sung by her companion Girijāyā. The Pads belong to the sixteenth century or later, while the Muslim conquest of Bengal took place in the twelfth century. There is nothing so flagrantly anachronistic in *Durges-nandini*, though it is hard to believe that the hero would have been admitted into the harem of a Muslim nawab and been nursed by the nawab's daughter.

Baṅkim is happier when he writes about the life around him, but he also has serious limitations as a social novelist. His outlook is confined to the upper middle class to which he himself belonged, and of which he was one of the greatest representatives of his age. He hardly seems to have been aware of the existence of the working class apart from domestic servants, and these he generally represents as the stock caricatures, witty and pert, of conventional comedy. Hirā, the maid-servant in *Viśavrikṣa*, is reserved for serious treatment, but that is because the story of her seduction is designed to point a *bourgeois* moral. On those rare occasions when Baṅkim notices the lower middle class (as in the description of the domestic life of Sānti and of Praphulla and her mother), he transforms the stark realities of their poverty into dream-pictures of happiness. In his attitude to his own class, as to the other classes,

Baṅkim is always the typical *bourgeois*, smug, sentimental, didactic, and conservative, and the world he creates is as narrow as it is false. All his men except Govindalāl are pasteboard, and his women, though more convincing than his men, are not altogether real. Saivalini, Rohini, and Suryamukhi, for example, are three women who spring straight from life, and are intensely real to start with, but they too end on a false note. Saivalini goes mad in repentance, Rohini pursues a cheap intrigue, and Suryamukhi drowns herself in sentimental slush. They remain true to their own nature, and live their own life, up to the middle of the story, but in the end their integrity is sacrificed to the author's propagandist purpose. The other women are creatures of propaganda from beginning to end.

The propaganda is for the conventional moral, the ready-made value, which Baṅkim unquestioningly accepts and enthusiastically upholds. As is to be expected, he is a champion of the institution of marriage, and the simple-minded zeal with which he extols the conjugal virtues, particularly in women, is responsible for many of the absurdities and falsities one finds in his novels. The heroine of *Devi Chaudhurāni* is one of Baṅkim's model wives, designed to illustrate the ultimate dependence of women on their husbands. She relinquishes her noble mission, and her queenly power and place, in order to share the life of a husband who has two more wives and is a ninny into the bargain. Saivalini, the errant wife in *Chandrasekhar*, receives exemplary punishment for having left her husband and gone in search of Pratāp, the man she loves. She is repulsed by Pratāp, and expiates her sin in hellish torment of soul resulting in insanity. The fact that her husband never loved her does not mitigate the sentence Baṅkim passes on her, any more than does the other fact that she and Pratāp had loved each other in their childhood and adolescence. There is no suggestion of any physical relationship between her and her lover, but even so she must pay dearly for the dangerous thoughts she had harboured. The artistic possibilities that there were in the conflict between Saivalini's love for Pratāp and her duty to her husband are not properly explored, because the artist in Baṅkim is overshadowed by the moralist.

Lavaṅga-latā in *Rajani* is another of Baṅkim's model wives. She is a young girl who has been married to an old man with a family by another wife, but is nevertheless the happiest and most devoted of wives. The young Amarnāth loves her and is caught

hiding in her room. Lavaṅga-latā vindicates her wifely virtue with sadistic fervour by having the word 'Thief' branded on Amarnāth's back with a hot iron. In the years that follow Amarnāth gains her esteem by performing many good deeds, and at the end of the story comes to take final leave of her. The following is a fair summary of the conversation that takes place between them:

'Are you really going away from Calcutta?' Lavaṅga asked.

'Yes,' I answered.

'And why?' she asked.

'Why should I not?' I returned. 'I have no one to ask me not to go.'

'If I ask you not to go?'

'What am I to you that you should dissuade me?'

'What are you to me? I do not know. Perhaps in this world you are nobody. But if there is another world——'

Lavaṅga stopped short and did not complete the sentence. I waited a little and then said, 'If there is another world, what then?'

'I am a woman, naturally weak. What would you gain by putting my strength to the test? I can only say that I sincerely wish you well.'

'I fully believe that. But there is one thing I have never been able to understand. Why did you brand this mark of infamy on my person?'

'You committed a wicked deed. I too out of childish frivolity committed a great wrong. I only pray you will forgive me.'

'I have forgiven you before you asked. And indeed there is no question of forgiveness. It served me right, I deserved that punishment. Now I am going away, never to return, never again to see you. But if ever in the future you heard of me, would you feel any affection for me?'

'I am afraid it would be sinful of me if I felt any love for you.'

'I beg your pardon. I no longer ask for your love. But in your heart, deep and vast as the ocean, is there no room, be it ever so small, for me?'

'No, none at all. I have not the least affection for the man who fell in love with me without being my husband. I shall not harbour even such affection for him as one entertains for a pet bird.'<sup>1</sup>

Sentiments so prim and proper could not but endear Bāṅkim to his middle-class readers, particularly the husbands. He has one or more love-stories to tell in every novel, but takes care that they uphold, and even glorify, the social conventions. He is a moralist rather than an objective artist, and it does not take us long to learn that his good people are those who observe the social proprieties and his bad people are those who do not. The narrow and naïve world of his novels is no doubt a reflection of the Bengali society of

<sup>1</sup> Based on the translation by P. Majumdar.

his time, but it is also a product of the ideas he himself held on social questions; all the more so because he is not a realist who records life impersonally as he finds it, but is a romantic who transforms life according to his ideals. He lived in an age of social reformation when progressive people like Iswar-chandra Vidyāsāgar were deeply moved by the unhappy condition of widows, and fought for the legalization of widow-marriage; and yet his own attitude towards widows is most unsympathetic. Kunda in *Visa-vriksa* and Rohini in *Kṛṣṇakānter Will* are young widows whose natural craving for love and happiness is cruelly punished. Kunda commits suicide and Rohini is shot. Another instance of Bankim's reactionary conservatism is his unquestioning acceptance of polygamy in *Devi Chaudhurāni* and *Sitārām*. The antiquated ideas he held on social questions could not but restrict his artistic possibilities. He shows no interest in the complexities of human relationships, or in the subtleties and profundities of human character, and his main object is to hold before us models of the conventional virtues and vices. Pratāp is one of his ideal characters, raised to unnatural perfection for our admiration and edification. He loves Saivalini, but with a pure, silent love, and repulses her out of respect for the seventh commandment. Finally he courts death on realizing that Saivalini will not cease to love him so long as he is alive. His dying speech is one of those pieces of grandiloquence Bankim offers his readers as a special treat:

What would you understand, you ascetic [Pratāp is speaking to Rāmānanda Swāmi]? Who is there in this world who can comprehend this love of mine? Who can realize how much I have loved Saivalini for the last fifteen years? I am not attached to her with a sinful heart, my love is another name for a desire for self-sacrifice. Day and night have I felt this love in my veins, in my blood, and in my bones. No one ever knew of it, no one would ever have known of it. Why did you raise this matter at the time of my death? I knew that this love would bring forth no good, and that is why I have sought death. My mind has been tainted, and a change may come over Saivalini's mind too. There was no other way but for me to die, so I have courted death. You are wise and versed in the sāstras [sacred books], tell me what is the atonement for my sin. Am I guilty in the eyes of God? If I am, would not my death atone for my guilt?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Based on the translation by D. C. Mullick. Saivalini's declaration of love in Part II, chapter 2 is equally grandiloquent.

At the opposite end from Pratāp stand such characters as Hirā, the servant-maid who took the wrong turning, and Devendra, the young rake who seduces her. They are monsters of vice as Pratāp is a monster of virtue, and the consequence of their vice has been painted in the most lurid colours to serve us as warning.

Baṅkim is at his best in his less ambitious novels such as *Indirā*. Their light domestic theme does not call for any great insight into social or human problems, and gives Baṅkim ample scope for his powers of familiar observation and genial comment. He cannot see far or deep, but he knows his men and women well from the outside, and he can chat about them agreeably. Irrespective of the historical, social, or political significance of his theme, his interest always narrows down to domestic matters, and all his novels are in essence domestic novels.

The political novels show no understanding of political issues, and their patriotism, though genuine, is of the romantic, sentimental, and wishful sort that evaporates in high-sounding talk and theatrical action. They are, besides, heavily doped with love and mysticism. This is best illustrated by *Ananda-maṭh*, the greatest of Baṅkim's political novels and the gospel of Indian nationalists for nearly half a century. The revolutionary patriots of that novel are *sannyāsis* (holy men) who have turned bandits for the deliverance of their country. They live in a *maṭh* (monastery) in the depths of a forest and worship quaint, mystic images. They have taken the vow of celibacy, and it is the breaking of that vow, not any defect in their political idea or organization, that brings about their ruin and the ruin of their cause. Baṅkim presents them with great seriousness, not realizing what nincompoops he has made of them. They are half-baked monks who play with the idea of revolution and are defeated in the end. Their revolution is bogged up in love, and both love and revolution are bogged up in mysticism. Baṅkim was an anti-revolutionary, as we know from the preface to the first edition of *Ananda-maṭh*: 'Social revolution is very often nothing but self-immolation. A revolutionary is a self-killer.' Why then he should have chosen the Sannyasi Rebellion of 1772 as his subject is not clear, unless it be to blunt its revolutionary issue with such things as love and mysticism. In any case the mixing up of such incongruous and irrelevant elements as revolution, love, and mysticism has produced a very unsatisfactory novel.

The worst feature of *Ananda-maṭh*, as of *Devi Chaudhurāni* and

*Sitārām*, is the dead mass of mystical-didactic verbiage with which it is loaded. We are told that those novels contain Bankim's exposition of the doctrine of disinterestedness of the *Gītā*, but the exposition is trite, obtrusive, and altogether inartistic. It is not being forgotten that many of Bankim's limitations are the limitations of his age, that the sentimental, unrealistic, and semi-religious character of his political thought is largely due to the absence of a properly developed nationalist movement in the seventies and eighties. The anti-Muslim prejudice Bankim displays in many novels is accounted for by Muslim tyranny and misrule in pre-British times, but it is also an expression of communal hatred. A Hindu first and foremost, he writes with the bitterness of his persecuted race. In *Ānanda-maṭh*, *Mrinālīni*, *Sitārām*, and other novels his patriotism takes the form of glorifying Hindus who defy Muslim power. He conceives of freedom as freedom for Hindus alone, and lacks the wider vision, not altogether unknown in that age, of Hindus and Muslims united in a common nationhood. In *Ānanda-maṭh* he hails British rule with enthusiasm and gratitude for having put an end to Muslim oppression and anarchy, but conveniently forgets the responsibility of the East India Company for the terrible famine of 1769-70 which is the background of that novel. As a matter of fact the responsibility of the Company was greater than that of the Muslim nawab who was then the nominal ruler of Bengal. In *Ānanda-maṭh* and elsewhere he takes the view that Hinduism has decayed through the exclusive attention it has in the past paid to spiritual knowledge, and that the British have been providentially sent to India to impart that knowledge of the physical sciences without which true spirituality cannot thrive. The view is too idealistic and ignores the economic and political aspects of British rule, but there is nevertheless an element of truth in it. It runs through the synthesis between the East and the West made by Indian thinkers from Rāmmohan Rāy to Rabindranath Tagore.

Considered purely as works of art, Bankim's novels suffer from a fundamental indiscipline arising from his inordinate sentimentality. He has it in him to write with the utmost simplicity and precision, yet he fills his pages with the cheapest rhetoric, with the most absurd ostentations and affectations. Some of his descriptions of the physical appearance of his heroines would shame the most artificial of Sanskrit rhetoricians. Those who know him in the



original are only too familiar with the purple passages, almost comically gushing and effusive, which he turns out with complete self-satisfaction when he wishes to write well. A good instance is the apostrophe to Pratāp at the end of *Chandrasekhar*.<sup>1</sup>

Then go, Pratāp, go to the eternal abode. Go where there is no trouble in the subjugation of the senses, where there is no evil fascination in beauty, where there is no sin in love. Go where beauty is infinite, love is infinite, happiness is infinite, and where there is infinite virtue in happiness. Go where one feels another's sorrow, where one safeguards another's virtue, sings another's praise, and where one does not have to sacrifice one's life for another. Go to that land of supreme glory. Even if you had a hundred thousand Saivalinis at your feet there, you would not care to love them.

He falsifies his characters and situations by over-dramatizing them (as in the scene in *Durges-nandini* where Āyesā declares her love for Jagat Simha), and his moralizings are responsible for many a dusty page. His tender and moving scenes (such as the reunion of Nagendra and Suryamukhi in *Visavriksa* and the encounters between Praphulla and Vrajeswar in *Devi Chaudhurāni*) are orgies of shoddy and tawdry sentimentality, and he has a fondness for cheap showmanship (e.g. beautiful women flourishing daggers, and bold men performing impossible feats of heroism) and crude melodrama. Kapāl-kunḍalā in the novel of that name is a Miranda-like girl who has grown up in the loneliness of the sea and the forest, and is out of her element in the world of men and women to which she is brought after her marriage with Navakumār. So she agrees to renounce her husband when Lutufunnisā, his first wife, asks her to do so. 'Kapāl-kunḍalā again pondered. Her mind's eye swept all over the world, but could not see any familiar face there. She gazed into her own heart, but she could not see Navakumār there. Then why should she stand in the way of Lutufunnisā's happiness?' Here was an excellent idea, and it would have provided the fittest ending of the story. But Bankim has spoilt it by bringing in the crude melodramatic elements of the Kāpālik's revenge and Navakumār's suspicions of Kapāl-kunḍalā's chastity. Nothing can be more gruesome than the last chapter where Kapāl-kunḍalā is taken to the cremation ground to be killed by the Kāpālik and Navakumār. The following passage from that

<sup>1</sup> Another instance is the apostrophe to Praphulla at the end of *Devi Chaudhurāni*.

chapter is a good example of Baṅkim's characteristic love of exaggeration.

On the cremation ground could be heard now and again the hideous howl of corpse-devouring animals. . . . Navakumār took Kapāl-kundalā by the hand and led her across the cremation ground to bathe her. Bones pierced their feet. Navakumār trod on a pot of water and broke it. Near it lay a corpse—wretched corpse! no one had cremated it—and both of them touched it with their feet. Kapāl-kundalā went round it, Navakumār trampled it beneath his feet. Wild corpse-devouring animals were roaming around. At the approach of the human beings they yelled loudly, some came to attack, while others ran away howling.<sup>1</sup>

These faults, however serious, might have been overlooked in a novelist who had the art of story-telling. But many of Baṅkim's plots violate the elementary laws of probability and naturalness. Suryamukhi turns Kunda, a girl of sixteen, out on the streets on the merest suspicion of her immorality and without asking for an explanation. Kunda takes poison, but dies in a perfectly normal state of body and mind and without any suggestion of physical pain.<sup>2</sup> With a gun in his hand Govindalāl makes a long and flowery speech (the sort Baṅkim specially delights in writing) before shooting Rohini.<sup>3</sup> Things happen in Baṅkim's novels as in fairy-tales, and we are not to ask questions. A timely storm rises in obedience to the author's will and brings about the crisis of *Devī Chaudhurānī*. A timely tidal wave does the same in *Kapāl-kundalā*. Then there are the *sannyāsis*, *bhairavis*, and other holy men and women whose miraculous powers enable them to do whatever the author wants, and who make novel-writing the easiest job on earth. Saivalini's insanity is cured miraculously by one such holy man,<sup>4</sup> and Rajani's blindness by another.<sup>5</sup> To give other instances of Baṅkim's happy-go-lucky technique: Châd Sâh Fakir gets wind of Gaṅgārām's treachery in the most unlikely circumstances,<sup>6</sup> and Hem-chandra and Byomkes are brought together by the long arm of coincidence in a city that is being ravaged by invaders.<sup>7</sup>

Baṅkim's characters have but little freedom of action because of the importance he assigns to chance. Fate rules the lives of his men and women, and the world they inhabit is as primitive as that

<sup>1</sup> Based on the translation by H. A. D. Phillips.

<sup>2</sup> *Visavriksa*.

<sup>3</sup> *Krisnakānter Will*.

<sup>4</sup> *Chandrasekhar*.

<sup>5</sup> *Rajani*.

<sup>6</sup> *Sitārām*.

<sup>7</sup> *Mrinālīni*.

of Greek tragedy. This does not mean, though, that there is any exploration of the primary values in Baṅkim's novels as there is in Greek tragedy or Shakespearian tragedy. How primitive this world is may also be seen from the important issues that depend on dreams, waking visions, and astrological predictions. A goddess asks Kalyāni in a dream to renounce her life,<sup>1</sup> and Kapāl-kunḍalā is led by a vision of the goddess Kālī on her way back after her meeting with Lutufunnisā.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing in the dreams and visions to interest the psychologist or the psycho-analyst, and at best they represent the popular idea that coming events cast their shadows before. Kunda sees Nagendra in a dream before she meets him. In the same dream she sees her dead mother who warns her against Nagendra. In the next few years she is married to Nagendra and great unhappiness follows. Her mother re-appears in a dream, reprimands her for not having heeded her warning, and advises her to put an end to her life. Thereupon Kunda takes poison.<sup>3</sup> The astrological predictions are equally naïve. The heroine of *Sitārām* has been separated from her husband because of the prediction that she will cause the death of some one dear to her. The main theme of the novel hinges on this, but in the end she causes the death, not of her husband, but of her brother. There is no tragic irony in this capricious working of fate, no appeal to our pity and terror in this tragic waste of the heroine's life. Even more pointless and fatuous is the use that has been made of the prediction in *Mrinālini*. The historical part of that novel turns on the prophecy that traders from the West will conquer Bengal from the Muslims. Hem-chandra is a western Indian prince who is a trader by caste, and he takes up arms to fulfil the prophecy. He fails, and we are left to infer that the prophecy will come true six centuries later, when the East India Company will conquer Bengal.

The creation, by Baṅkim, of a popular taste for the novel led to a great demand for novels in the period under review. A good many novelists appeared in answer to the demand, but the average quality of their work was low, and only the best of them will be noticed here. Pratāp-chandra Ghos, the author of *Vaṅgādhip Parājay*, combined a sound knowledge of history with a power of accurate observation and natural expression not commonly found in that period. But he is a very uneven writer, and cannot hold our interest through a long novel. Chandīcharan Sen took history as

<sup>1</sup> *Ānanda-maṭh*.

<sup>2</sup> *Kapāl-kunḍalā*.

<sup>3</sup> *Visavriksa*.

his subject in *Mahārājā Nandakumār* and other novels, and in Rames-chandra Datta<sup>1</sup> (1848-1909) we have our best historical novelist and one of our best novelists. An eminent scholar, historian, economist, and administrator, Rames is one of the greatest Indians of the nineteenth century. He is equally notable for his English and Bengali works, for his learned dissertations and his novels. A member of the anglicized Datta family of Rāmbāgān in Calcutta, Rames received part of his education in England, and is one of the best products of Western influence. He started writing in Bengali on Baṅkim's advice, and, as would seem from his first two novels, partly under Baṅkim's influence. *Vaṅgavijetā* and *Mādhavikaṅkan* are romantic tales with a historical background and have nothing distinctive about them. But Rames struck out a line of his own in *Rājput Jivan-sandhyā* and *Mahārāstra Jivan-prabhāt*, the two full-dress historical novels that were his next productions. These four novels span a hundred years of Indian history from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth, and the last two in particular are fervently patriotic. *Rājput Jivan-sandhyā* describes the decline of Rajput power and *Mahārāstra Jivan-prabhāt* describes the rise of the Marathas under Sivāji. They are competent works, and bear the impress of the author's cultivated mind, but they do not show him to have been a creative artist of a high order. Rames's materials are good, and presented with a historian's knowledge and care, but he is not able to breathe life into them. He has a sense of discipline rare in our writers, and does not allow the economy and lucidity of his style to be spoilt by sentimentality. But he lacks colour and imaginative vision, and although he never descends below a certain level, he never rises far above it either. His best works are the two social novels *Samsār* and *Samāj*. They have somewhat slender themes, but their descriptions of village life have a warm homeliness which is very enjoyable.

The other novelists we are going to mention were all social novelists. Saṅjiv-chandra Chaṭṭopādhyāy,<sup>1</sup> a brother of Baṅkim, is still remembered for his *Māndhavidatā*, *Kaṇṭhamālā*, and other stories. He has a quiet, unassuming manner and occasional flashes of insight. The *Meja Bau* by Sivrāth Sāstri<sup>1</sup> and the *Sri-sri-rāj-lakṣmī* by Yogendrachandra Vasu<sup>1</sup> were popular in their day, as were some of the novels of Dāmodar Mukhopādhyāy. Tāraknāth

<sup>1</sup> See p. 132.

Gaṅgopādhāy was a realist, the only one in that age dominated by Baṅkim, and his *Swarnalatā* still retains its interest as the most realistic picture of middle-class life in our literature.

To turn to the women novelists: Srimati Hemāṅgini was the earliest in the field with her *Manoramā*, while Swarnakumāri Devi, with her *Snehalatā* and other works, proved herself the most talented.

To speak generally, the novel of the period, like its poetry and drama, was swamped by conventional feeling and was unadventurous in technique. Its average level was that of the pot-boiler, and it was obviously derivative, owing much to the same class of English fiction. The reading public that encouraged its production almost entirely belonged to the new-risen middle and lower middle class, who had not yet acquired a good literary taste.

Considered as a whole, the literature of the period appears as a mixture, not altogether harmonious, of native and foreign elements. It reproduced in a considerable measure the outworn modes and conceptions it inherited from the past, and at the same time it absorbed many of the new influences that came from the West. We have already seen that the best things in it were of European origin, but we should also note that, except in the work of a small number of intellectuals, the best elements of European literature cannot be said to have arrived in Bengal, or, having arrived, to have struck roots. This is as true of the present day as of the nineteenth century, and of the other Indian vernacular literatures as of Bengali. We have had no Bengali writer who has sought from Europe the intellectuality and scientific realism which our literature most needed, and which are among the best things Europe could give. On the contrary many of our writers have sought in the West new refuges for the sentimentalism, escapism, and mysticism which have been the bane of our literature in the past. The main things which Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, imported from the West are the sentimental langours of the Celtic Twilight, the affectations of the *fin de siècle* aestheticism, and the misty vagueness of Maeterlinckian symbolism. Many other writers could be cited to show that the emasculated, *démodé*, and decadent elements of Western literature have found a more congenial soil in India than the living and virile elements.

At a lower level, westernized Bengali literature has suffered from

the fact that the class of Western literature that has exerted the most vital and widespread influence on it is the journalistic and pseudo-literary class that is to be found in the railway book-stalls and suburban libraries of Europe. This is as much due to the inability of the majority of Indians to comprehend the best elements of European literature as it is to the same inability on the part of the majority of Europeans, belonging chiefly to the military and commercial classes, who go to India. The taste these Europeans diffuse for the Marie Corellis, Ethel M. Dells, Gilbert Frankaus, and similar writers is freely acquired by the majority of educated Indians who know English. The regrettable result is not so much that this class of literature enjoys the greatest popularity in India—it does that in Europe too—as that it is regarded seriously as exemplifying European modernity and intellectuality, and as the best that Europe could give to India. The Indian universities try to improve taste, but they cater for only about one out of every three thousand Indians, and their influence hardly touches the fringe of the living, creative literature. While Bengali literature had a prevailing rustic character before the nineteenth century, it has since acquired a prevailing petty-bourgeois character. The greater Europeans are by no means unknown or unread, but their popularity and influence are negligible compared with the popularity and influence of the inferior class of writers mentioned above. In the sphere of literature as of commerce, it is the mass-produced British goods that have found the best market in India.

English is the medium through which Western culture has spread in India, but the teaching of English in schools and colleges has always been extremely inadequate, and the number of Indians who know it has always been very small. Of that small number, again, the majority have learnt the language for vocational purposes and have not acquired a proper understanding of English literature. Another reason why Bengali literature has not been able to absorb the better elements of English literature is to be found in its low state of development before the nineteenth century. But it is the difference in the conditions of European and Indian life which has most impeded the diffusion of European culture and has produced the worst anomalies and incongruities. The ideas, modes, or themes which Bengali writers have borrowed from Europe have often remained alien, rootless, and unreal for the reason that the proper conditions for their naturalization were lacking in Bengali life.

Many of the so-called problems, and much of the so-called psychology, of our latter-day sex-novelists, for instance, are clearly divorced from our life. Sarat-chandra Chatterjāy and his followers have imported them ready-made from third-rate European novels, and our present school of pseudo-realistic fiction is a glaring instance of the bastard culture that is an offspring of the meeting of the East and the West. All this is not meant to suggest that the increasing fertilization of Bengali literature by the West is neither desirable nor practicable; it is to show the difficulties that have lain in the way. Anomalies and incongruities were only to be expected from the meeting of two cultures so diverse as the Eastern and the Western, and they fade into insignificance beside the benefits that have already resulted from that meeting.

CHAPTER V  
RABINDRANATH TAGORE<sup>1</sup>  
1861-1941

TAGORE'S literary life extended over sixty years, and he reminds one of Victor Hugo in the copiousness and variety of his work: over one thousand poems; nearly two dozen plays and playlets; eight novels; eight or more volumes of short stories; more than two thousand songs, of which he wrote both the words and the music; and a mass of prose on literary, social, religious, political, and other topics. Add to these his English translations; his paintings; his travels and lecture-tours in Asia, America, and Europe; and his activities as educationist, as social and religious reformer, and as politician—and there you have, judged by quantity alone, the life-work of a Titan. This is not to say that his genius was no more than the capacity for taking infinite pains; but to note the element of steel and concrete that went to his making, and thus to dispose of the legend, that has grown in some quarters in recent years, of Tagore the pale-lily poet of ladies' tables.

Not that the legend is entirely baseless. Tagore's almost continuous iteration, in his English translations, of the softer side of his poetry and of his wistful-mystical message, is partly responsible for it. After having won world-fame with the mystical-devotional poetry of the English *Gitanjali*, he dug overmuch along that particular seam, producing a monotonously one-sided impression of his work. It is true that *The Gardener* and the subsequent volumes of translations gave some of his best lyrics, but they also gave many poems which were very thin and had nothing beyond a delicate fancy or a pretty sensibility to show for their author. The more substantial and virile side of his work, such as his social, political, descriptive, and narrative poetry and his poetry of abstract thought, was either never presented at all or was presented in a terribly mutilated and emasculated form. The lack of proper selection and presentation was all the more serious for the reason that the quality of Tagore's work is very uneven, as it is of all writers whose output is large and spread over a long period. He

<sup>1</sup> This is the anglicized version of the poet's name. The original Bengali is to be transliterated as Ravindranāth Thākūr.



very often wrote without any real urgency, and without that high tension of feeling and expression which makes great poetry. At such times he became sentimental and luxuriant, losing himself (to quote his own words) in an endless mist of vague sweetness. 'From your blossoming garden gather fragrant memories of the vanished flowers of a hundred years before' from *The Gardener* is an almost random example of the greeting-card kind of poetry which he could often produce and publish. The same collection contains such pretty banalities as the following:

When she passed by me with quick steps, the end of her skirt touched me.

From the unknown island of the heart came a sudden warm breath of spring.

A flutter of a flitting touch brushed me and vanished in a moment, like a torn flower-petal blown in the breeze.

It fell upon my heart like a sigh of her body and whisper of her heart.

In his devotional-mystical works, too, we often have the luxury rather than the ardour of his spirit, his delicious heart-aches and perfumed sighs rather than any deep experience wrung out of hard struggle with fact. Always most pleasant and charming, he is rarely moving and convincing. The lack of any deep-seated conflict in his nature, while it gave him spontaneity and saved him from morbid introspection and self-analysis, was also responsible for many a facile sentiment and gilded platitude.

Listen, my heart, in his flute is the music of the smell of wild flowers, of the glistening leaves and gleaming water, of shadows resonant with bees' wings.

The flute steals his smile from my friend's lips and spreads it over my life.<sup>1</sup>

'When the harp is truly strung', Tagore wrote in *Sādhanā*, 'when there is not the slightest laxity in the strength of the bond, then only does music result.' The languid diffuseness and wishy-washy day-dreaminess of much of Tagore's poetry show that his harp was not always truly strung. Very few poets outside the popular magazines have been so given to conceits and clichés as Tagore was, or have been so easily captivated by every sugared epithet and pretty-pretty imagery that happened to come to their minds. He is one of the world's great romantics, and yet he could clutter up his work with the shoddiest pseudo-romantic bric-à-brac of the East

<sup>1</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*.

and the West. He had it in him to write with biblical naturalness and ease, and yet he indulged in the cheapest affectations and mannerisms.

I was walking by the road, I do not know why, when the noonday was past and bamboo branches rustled in the wind.

The prone shadows with their outstretched arms clung to the feet of the hurrying light.

The *koels* were weary of their songs.

I was walking by the road, I do not know why.<sup>1</sup>

And so on, for the rest of the poem the pet affectation 'I do not know why' (it is the old *Je ne sais quoi*) is paraded in every stanza.

The above are among the reasons why Tagore's reputation, tremendous and world-wide in the years following 1912, has suffered a decline in recent years. But the faults of a writer of Tagore's magnitude do not really affect his essential merit. Most of his faults are to be traced to the influence of the mid-Victorian age in which he was born, and of the literary models and fashions on which he was brought up: the flowery sentimentality, for instance, of Sanskrit lyric poetry, particularly of the Jaya Deva school; and the langours and affectations of the European aesthetic movement of the *fin de siècle*. The Vaisnava Pad-writers<sup>2</sup> were a formative influence on Tagore, and he imitated them in *Bhānu-sinher Padāvali*. Although they supplied him with some excellent ideas and images, they were also responsible for many of his banalities and trivialities. It should also be remembered that Tagore's faults are more apparent in his English translations than in the original Bengali.<sup>3</sup> There, because he is writing in his mother tongue, and in Chalit-bhāsā (colloquial language), his style remains sweet in spite of the artificialities and sentimentalities from which it is seldom free. Properly to enjoy and appraise him it is necessary to know him in the original, with all his verbal and metrical felicity. He started writing in English when he was over fifty, and his translations of his poems—with the exception of the *Gitanjali* which was a recreation—barely preserved the skeleton of their originals. They were semi-poetic (sometimes pseudo-poetic) summaries and paraphrases, much truncated in body and emasculated in spirit, and without the slightest suggestion of his metrical variety and

<sup>1</sup> *The Gardener*.

<sup>2</sup> See pp. 54 ff.

<sup>3</sup> This does not mean, though, that many of his poems (e.g. 'Thou art the sky' and 'thou art the nest as well') have not improved in the translation.

virility. They gave little idea, and often they gave a wrong idea, of the best that Tagore could do.

To show how Tagore's peculiar methods of translation and presentation have impaired some of his best works: one of his best songs is the following from *The Gardener* beginning:

I am restless. I am athirst for far-away things.

My soul goes out in a longing to touch the skirt of the dim distance.

O Great Beyond, O the keen call of thy flute!

I forget, I ever forget, that I have no wings to fly, that I am bound in this spot ever more.

So far this is faithful to the original. But in the second stanza 'I have no wings' has been changed to the puerile 'I have not the winged horse', and the resulting nursery atmosphere has destroyed the entire spirit of the poem. The English version of 'Sonār Tari' (Golden Boat),<sup>1</sup> one of Tagore's best mystical poems, besides being shorter by over two-thirds, has drained away the life-blood of the original. The river along which the mystical person comes in the golden boat 'licked up and swallowed the island', while in the original it is 'razor-edged, sharp to touch'. 'Urbasi' is Tagore's greatest ode, comparable with Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', and magnificent in its blending of classical and vernacular diction, of mythological and popular imagery. In the barely moist bones that have been preserved in the English version, not only has the poem lost its original loveliness and grandeur, but such gratuitous effeminacies as 'glad that the dark hours are so secret' have been interpolated. Urbasi in Hindu mythology is the dancer before the gods, and the stanza describing her dancing is perhaps the best in the poem. The poet's version<sup>1</sup> runs:

When you dance before the gods, flinging orbits of novel rhythm into space, Urbasi, the earth shivers, leaf and grass and autumn fields heave and sway; the sea surges into a frenzy of rhyming waves; the stars drop into the sky—beads from the chain that leaps till it breaks on your breast; and the blood dances in men's hearts with sudden turmoil. Compare that with the following literal translation<sup>2</sup> of the original to get an idea of the loss.

In the assembly of the gods when you dance in ecstasy of joy,  
O swaying wave Urbasi!

<sup>1</sup> *Fugitive and Other Poems.*

<sup>2</sup> Based on Edward Thompson's translation.

The sea surges in the same rhythmic dance;  
 In the crest of the corn the skirt of the earth shivers;  
 From the jewelry on your breasts stars drop into the sky;  
 Suddenly in the breast of man the heart loses itself;  
 The blood-stream dances!  
 Suddenly on the horizon your girdle bursts asunder;  
 O wild abandon!

Even a worse fate has befallen 'Balākā', Tagore's best reflective poem. To give an idea of what it is like in the original a literal translation of the first part is offered later in this essay. The poet's own version<sup>1</sup> is but a pale ghost of the original.

Tagore is without a doubt the finest product of Western influence. The Western element in his work affords excellent evidence of the ideal of internationalism which he passionately held and worked for. He was a firm believer in Rāmmohan Rāy's ideal of a universal human culture, and he gave practical shape to it by founding the Viswabhāratī, an international university. He held that in a world like the present, torn by economic and political strifes, it is all the more necessary that creative artists and poets should have an international and cosmopolitan outlook; while having their roots in the national soil, and deriving sustenance from it, they should at the same time breathe an international air; only then would they prove themselves true custodians of the human spirit. History had taught him that though men had fought against one another in the past, they had also combined among themselves. It was their moral spirit of combination which was the basis of their true greatness and had fostered their art, science, and religion.

Man can destroy and plunder . . . but he is great because his soul comprehends all. . . . Essentially man is not a slave of himself or of the world, he is a lover. His freedom and fulfilment is in love, which is another name for perfect comprehension.<sup>2</sup>

Tagore's internationalism will be one of his chief claims to future remembrance. As a writer he is conspicuous for the universal range of his sympathies, and for his fine blending of cultures Asiatic and European, ancient and modern. Though primarily an Indian, and a Bengali, he belongs, by his delicate mastery of the English tongue, to the English-speaking world. His works are as much the growth of the common Bengali soil as are the grass and the mango

<sup>1</sup> *Fugitive and Other Poems.*

<sup>2</sup> *Sādhana.*

groves on the banks of the Bhāgirathi, yet they are the product of a supreme culture, one of whose main streams came from Europe. He is, and will always remain, one of the world's greatest international writers.

The Tagores were a cultured and wealthy family, and Rabindranath's father, Devendranāth,<sup>1</sup> was one of the leaders of the Brāhma Samāj. The poet's early life was spent in an atmosphere of religion and the arts, principally literature, music, and painting. In religion his inspiration was derived from the Vedas and the Upanisads, but with him as with many Hindus the Upanisadic monism was diversified by the Vaisnava dualism which maintains the separateness of the divine and the human in order to show the process by which they realize each other. Though the Absolute is one and indivisible, in the phenomenal world God and man are regarded as separate and wooing each other. The influence of these two trends of thought is found throughout in Tagore's religious poetry.

In music Tagore's training was classical Indian, though as a composer he rebelled against the tyranny of classical orthodoxy, and introduced many variations of form and phrase, notably from Bengali folk-music of the Bāul and Bhāṭiyāli type. He had some training in European music during his first visit to England, and some of his early songs were composed to the tunes of the Border Ballads and Moore's *Irish Melodies*. In later life he made some experiments on harmonization in the European manner. As a writer the course of his life was early set. He was brought up on three languages—Sanskrit, Bengali, and English—and the most formative influences were those of the Sanskrit classics (particularly Kālidāsa), the Vaisnava poets of Bengal, and the English romantics and post-romantics, most notably Shelley. In later life he went to other English and European writers and schools, notably Browning and Maeterlinck (for the symbolical plays), the English aesthetes of the *fin de siècle*, and the poets of the Celtic Twilight. Except for a short visit to England at the age of sixteen, his early life was spent in Calcutta or in the village of Silāidā on the Padmā where he managed the family estate. In 1901 he founded his school, the Sāntiniketan, at Bolpur as a protest against the existing bad system of education. The school was a great success and gave birth to the Viswabhārati. On revisiting England in 1911 he brought with him the English *Gitanjali*, and its publication in 1912

<sup>1</sup> See p. 127.

and the award of the Nobel Prize for literature the following year made him world-famous. This was the first award of that prize to an Asiatic. The rest of Tagore's life was spent at Sāntiniketan, except for several travels and lecture-tours in which he carried his message of human unity to all the important countries of Asia, America, and Europe.

As a novelist Tagore gave good pictures of upper middle-class life in Bengal in *Naukāḍubi*,<sup>1</sup> *Chokher Bāli*,<sup>2</sup> and, later, in *Gorā* and *Ghare Bāire*.<sup>3</sup> The last two, perhaps the best novels written by an Indian, are interesting studies of the impact of Western ideas on Indian life. Tagore's technique is modern, and a great advance upon that of Baṅkim-chandra Chāṭṭopādhāy. His plays represent a large variety of types: social comedies in prose, such as *Chirakumār Sabhā*, *Goṛāy Galad*, and *Vaikunṭher Khātā*; romantic plays in verse which have appeared in abridged prose versions in English as *Chitra*, *Sanyasi*, *Sacrifice*, and *The King and the Queen*; symbolical plays in prose, such as *Rājā (King of the Dark Chamber)*, *Phālguni (Cycle of Spring)*, and *Rakta Karabi (Red Oleanders)*; and short romantic playlets such as *Mālini*, *Chandālikā*, and *Naṭir Pujā*. *The Post Office*<sup>4</sup> is generally regarded as a symbolical play, but is more aptly described as a fable. All these plays have songs, but Tagore wrote several plays, such as *Vālmiki-pratibhā* and *Māyār Khelā*, in which music predominates as in the European opera. Mention should also be made of the dramatic dialogues in verse, such as 'Karna o Kunti' and 'Vidāy-abhisāp'.

A number of things repeat themselves monotonously in Tagore's serious plays: popular uprisings (which are as serious as tempests in tea-cups); good kings who abdicate (in the manner of kings in nursery tales); and stock characters (e.g. Ṭhakurdādā, Dādā, Visu) through whom the author speaks and sings more directly than through the other characters. The emotional or spiritual crisis is almost always brought about by a young girl. Tagore's best dramatic work is to be found in his comedies, though this will appear too heterodox to some. In the comedies we meet some real people, while in the serious plays the characters are almost all of them mouthpieces for the author's songs and ideas. The songs are often good, and the ideas fine, but they by themselves do not make good plays. *Chitra* is delightful, particularly in the original, because of its poetry which makes us forget that it is a play. It is a mytho-

<sup>1</sup> *The Wreck.*<sup>2</sup> *Eyesore.*<sup>3</sup> *Home and the World.*<sup>4</sup> *Ḍāk-ghar.*

logical story set in a virgin forest far from human habitation, and its hero and heroine are no more real than the lovers on Keats's Grecian Urn. *The Post Office* is too delicate even to analyse, but it is sentimental to the core, and a most haphazard combination of realism and phantasy. It is not clear, for instance, whether the King's Herald and the State Physician are real (even if no more so than the other characters) or exist in Amal's fancy.

In *The Post Office* and in the poems on childhood in *Sisu* (*Crescent Moon*) Tagore saw children through a film of fancy and sentimentality. The trouble with the symbolical plays is that their symbolism is nebulous, and presented in the most vague and whimsical manner. Maeterlinck, Tagore's master in this genre, is lucidity and concreteness in comparison. Even in *Rājā*, the best of the symbolical plays and with a theme (God's relationship with the human soul) which calls for the utmost restraint and concentration, Tagore throws on the stage a whole crowd of people (Ṭhakurdādā and his followers) whose sole function seems to be to clog and confuse the action with their interminable singing and word-spinning. Tagore's characteristic prolixity and fondness for conceits and verbal ingenuities run riot in these plays. The best of the romantic plays, viz. *The King and the Queen* and *The Sacrifice*, had certain faults (e.g. declamation and over-burdened plot) in the original which have been eliminated from the abridged English versions. Apart from the fact that poetic plays can never be perfectly happy in prose versions, these two, particularly *The Sacrifice*, do fairly well in English. Tagore's other verse-plays are very carelessly written, often to the point of lacking rudimentary dramatic sense or even common sense. When Sanyāsi, the ascetic, in the play of that name, first meets Vāsanti, she says, 'Will you touch me?' In reply Sanyāsi says, 'Yes, because nothing can touch me truly. I am ever away in the endless . . . you are to me as the blue sky is—you are, yet you are not' and other equally incomprehensible things until Vāsanti, who is a little village girl, says, 'I do not understand you, father.' But Sanyāsi is undeterred, and inflates further: 'Don't you know this world is a bottomless chasm? The swarm of creatures, coming out from the hole of nothingness, seeks for shelter, and enters into the gaping mouth of this emptiness and is lost,' and so on and on until the poor child says, 'Father, you frighten me.' It is impossible for us not to laugh at Sanyāsi, though Tagore meant him to be taken seriously. The best thing

that can be said of Tagore's plays is that they are poetic rather than dramatic, and that their value consists in their poetic passages and songs rather than in their plot, action, or characters.

In *My Reminiscences* (*Jivan-smriti*) Tagore has recorded the inner history of his early poetry. It is the history of his emergence from the unreal and self-centred world of adolescence into the adult and super-personal world of man and nature. The emergence found expression in many early works: in the poem 'Awakening of the Fountain'<sup>1</sup> where the poet's soul was likened to a fountain imprisoned in a dark cave until one day the morning sun pierced the cave with its rays and set the fountain free; in the play *Vālmiki-pratibhā* where the imprisoned poetic genius of the robber-chief is set free by the awakening of love in his heart; and in the poem 'Prabhāt-utsav' (in *Prabhāt-sāṅgit*) with its jubilant cry:

I know not how of a sudden my heart flung open its doors,  
And let the crowd of worlds rush in, greeting each other.<sup>2</sup>

About the early play *Prakritir Pratisodh* (Nature's Revenge)<sup>3</sup> Tagore said in *My Reminiscences*:

The hero was a Sanyasi who had been striving to gain a victory over nature by cutting away the bonds of all desires and affections and thus to arrive at a true and profound knowledge of self. A little girl, however, brought him back from his communion with the infinite to the world and into a bondage of human affection. On so coming back the Sanyasi realized that the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bonds of form, and the eternal freedom of the soul in love. . . . 'Nature's Revenge' may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work; or, rather, this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt—the joy of attaining the infinite within the finite.

After *Prabhāt-sāṅgit* Tagore went from strength to strength in a rapid succession of works and ranging over a wide variety of matter and manner. His gift of lyricism and song was fully in evidence in *Karī o Komal* and *Mānasi* and attained ripeness in *Chitrā*.<sup>4</sup> The Ode to Urbasi which appeared in *Chitrā* is the highest watermark of his aestheticism. Urbasi is the ideal of beauty, non-human and amoral, the spirit of life eternally dancing

<sup>1</sup> 'Nirjharer Swapnabhaṅga', which Tagore translates in *My Reminiscences* as 'Awakening of the Waterfall.' I have substituted 'Fountain' for 'Waterfall' as being more appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> *My Reminiscences*.

<sup>3</sup> *Sanyasi* in the English translation.

<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with the play *Chitrāṅgadā* which appears in English as *Chitra*.



in the universe. Mysticism first appeared on a considerable scale in *Sonār Tari*, and Tagore's philosophical and devotional-mystical poetry attained maturity in *Naivedya*, *Kheyā*, and *Gītāñjali*. His poems of childhood appeared in *Sisu* (*Crescent Moon*); his stories in verse in *Kathā o Kāhini*, *Palātakā* (*Fugitive*), *Punascha*, and other volumes; and his epigrams in *Kanikā* (*Stray Birds*) and *Lekhan*. In addition he wrote many patriotic poems and songs and many poems having a social and political content. In the earlier of these Tagore's outlook was confined to Bengal and India, but in *Naivedya* and later volumes his political and social consciousness grew deeper and assumed an international aspect. His best reflective poems are to be found in *Balākā* and some of the later books. He is happiest in the bondage of rhyme, but has also written some beautiful blank verse and free verse.

Tagore's social and political poems are hardly known outside Bengal, but they contain some of his best work. They show a different Tagore from the languid and unreal figure of the wistful-mystical legend; they show an eager and fierce spirit, intensely human, and burning with indignation against inequality and injustice. Tagore started his literary career as a lyric poet, and all his life he was an aesthete searching for beauty in new forms and modes. Religion was always the deepest thing in his life, and his lyricism always soared on the two wings of secular and religious song. Introspection and mysticism came in the second stage of his career, and nourished his lyricism until its secular side ripened into the abstract and philosophical poems of the *Balākā* period, and its religious side ripened into the devotional and mystical works of the *Gītāñjali* period. But Tagore was no escapist at any point in his career; neither his aestheticism nor his mysticism was ever divorced from life. His practical activities as politician, educationist, and social and religious reformer bear ample evidence of this.

In some of his social poems Tagore poked fun at the hollow men and hollow institutions of his country, in others he painted moving pictures of the victims of oppression and injustice. Social satire is present in such poems as 'Dharma-prachār', 'Duranta Āsā', 'Nava-vaṅga-vir', 'Him Tīm Chhaṭ', and 'Jutār Āviskā'. The last two are in the form of apologues written round King Habu-chandra and Minister Gabu-chandra, the stock fools of Bengali folk-lore. Tagore finds his quarry in the smugness and verbose inefficiency

of his countrymen, and his delicious wit makes us wish that he had written a few more poems like these rather than many of his sentimental poems. In the poems in which he touches on working-class life he reveals a sympathetic attitude towards working-class people, and he takes their side against their masters, but he sees them from the outside and sentimentalizes them.<sup>1</sup> In 'Karma' after the master has rebuked his servant for being late and for not getting his bath and other comforts ready, the servant says 'Last night my daughter died at midnight', and, turning quickly, resumes his work like an automaton. 'Purātan Bhritya' is the story, full of sentimental appeal, of a servant who sacrifices his life to save that of his master. Tagore is open to the charge of class-complacency in these poems; in spite of his conscious sympathy for the servant, he really, though unconsciously, looks at the working man with the eyes of a master. In 'Dui Bighā Jami' the tenant is wrongly deprived of his home by the landlord, but the sentimental treatment of the story has spoilt its social issue. Surer in the handling of their social content, though they too are fundamentally sentimental, are the short stories in verse (in *Palātakā* and later books) dealing with the frustrations of Bengali middle-class life: the young man<sup>2</sup> who cannot pass examinations and cannot get a job; the girl<sup>2</sup> who cannot get married because she is not good-looking, and whose life is useless 'like an idle boat left on the beach of a dried-up stream'; and the young wife<sup>3</sup> whom the drudgery of housework has turned into an old and dying woman at the age of thirty-one.

Tagore was a proud and ardent patriot. His most intense period of political activity was in the years following 1905, when the agitation against the partition of Bengal was at its highest. He renounced his knighthood in 1919 as a protest against the Amritsar affair in a letter to the Viceroy which is among the great documents of freedom. 'The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen, who for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings.' His patriotic poems and songs, particularly the latter, have passed into the common heritage of his country; the song 'Bhārata-

<sup>1</sup> See *The Gardener*, lxxvii-lxxix.

<sup>2</sup> In 'Kālo Meye'.

<sup>3</sup> In 'Mukti'.

bhāgya-vidhātā' is now sung all over India as the national anthem. In some of these poems and songs he expresses his passionate love of Bengal's natural scenery,<sup>1</sup> while in others he sets forth his nationalist aspirations.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action——

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.<sup>2</sup>

Tagore's nationalism, far from having anything narrow or selfish in it, is instinct with lofty idealism. For him India is not merely the motherland of the nationalist; she represents a great spiritual principle, viz. the fundamental human unity of the diverse people who, whether as original inhabitants, immigrants, or conquerors, have made their home on her soil.

Awake, my heart, in the holy land

On India's mighty human sea . . .

No one knows at whose call the many streams of men

Came rushing from afar to mingle in that sea.<sup>3</sup>

Above all, freedom for India was for Tagore the freedom of her common people from oppression and injustice, foreign or native. In 'Apamānita' he reminds his country that it must expect insults from its foreign ruler as retribution for the insults it has itself heaped on some of its own people by withholding from them the elementary rights of humanity. He hated the cowardice of the weak as much as he hated the arrogance of the strong, but he was always on the side of the weak against the strong.

Those who walk on the path of pride crushing the lowly life under their tread, covering the tender green of the earth with their footprints in blood;

Let them rejoice, and thank thee, Lord, for the day is theirs.

<sup>1</sup> As in 'Sarat'.

<sup>2</sup> *Gitanjali*. See also the poem 'Freedom from fear' in *Fugitive and Other Poems*.

<sup>3</sup> 'Bhārat-tirtha'.

But I am thankful that my lot lies with the humble who suffer and bear the burden of power, and hide their faces and stifle their sobs in the dark.

For every throb of their pain has pulsed in the secret depth of thy night, and every insult has been gathered into thy great silence.

And the morrow is theirs.<sup>1</sup>

Tagore's nationalism is really his humanism applied to India, and his poems of nationalism are more aptly described as poems of humanism. He held that the Indian problem was a part of the world problem, and the advice he gave to Indian nationalists contained the following significant words:

The moment is arriving when you also must find a basis of unity which is not political. If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity. There is only one history—the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one.<sup>2</sup>

His own nationalism he always kept within the proper framework of internationalism. His ardent internationalism provides the justification (if justification be needed) for those poems in which he castigates the greedy and militant nationalism of some of the European countries. One of those poems is 'The Sunset of the Century', originally written on the last day of the last century, and prophetic in its vision of the wars which have since harrowed the world without a respite.

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance.

The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its own shameless feeding.

For it has made the world its food,

And licking it, crunching it, and swallowing it in big morsels,  
It swells and swells,

Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness. . . .<sup>2</sup>

'The Oarsmen' was written during the First World War.

All the black evils in the world have overflowed their banks.

Yet, oarsmen, take your places with the blessing of sorrow in your souls.

<sup>1</sup> *Fruit-Gathering.*

<sup>2</sup> *Nationalism.*

Whom do you blame, brothers? Bow your heads down!

The sin has been yours and ours.

The heat growing in the heart of God for ages—

The cowardice of the weak, the arrogance of the strong, the greed of fat prosperity, the rancour of the wronged, pride of race, and insult to man—

Has burst God's peace, raging in storm.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of Fascism caused Tagore intense distress, and he raised his voice against the Fascist rape of China, Abyssinia, Spain, and Czechoslovakia. Among the best work of his last five years are the poems 'To Africa' and 'The Worshipers of Buddha'. 'To Africa' concludes thus:

With man-traps stole upon you those hunters  
whose fierceness was keener than the fangs of your wolves,  
whose pride was blinder than your lightless forests.

The savage greed of the civilized stripped naked  
its unashamed inhumanity.

You wept and your cry was smothered,  
your forest trails became muddy with tears and blood,  
while the nailed boots of the robbers  
left their indelible prints  
along the history of your indignity.

And all the time across the sea,  
church bells were ringing in their towns and villages,  
the children were lulled in mothers' arms,  
and poets sang hymns to beauty.<sup>2</sup>

'The Worshipers of Buddha' was written (to quote the poet's words) on hearing the report that the Japanese were praying at the shrines of the Lord Buddha for his blessings on their successful massacre of the Chinese.

The war drums are sounded.

Men force their features into frightfulness and gnash their teeth;  
and before they rush out to gather raw human flesh  
for death's larder,  
they march to the temple of Buddha, the compassionate,  
to claim his blessings,  
while loud beats the drum rat-a-tat  
and earth trembles. . . .<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*.

<sup>2</sup> *Visvabharati Quarterly*, New Series, III. i.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* IV. i.

Tagore's recognition in Europe was gained by the English *Gitanjali*, a volume mainly of devotional songs. But to his countrymen, and to those who can read him in the original, Tagore is first and last a writer of lyric poems and songs of love and nature, and that is how, they think, he will live the longest. His lyric impulse, which flowed early, showed no sign of abatement for over sixty years, from the passionate freshness of the early 'Awakening of the Fountain' to the thought-darkened 'Last Songs' of a few years before his death. As a poet he has achieved more than average success in almost all the forms of his art, but he is greatest in the lyric, where his twin gifts of poetry and music blend most happily. His best songs are perhaps unique in their combination of beautiful poetry and beautiful music, although the full appreciation of their music is only possible for an Indian audience. Poetry and music run into each other in his work as inseparably as form and colour in natural objects, and it is difficult to say which of the two was his primary gift; though the probability in the present writer's opinion seems to be in favour of music. The wealth of verbal and metrical beauty he has given to Bengali poetry is great and reminds one of what Shelley, Tennyson, or Swinburne gave to English poetry. The most pleasing aspects of Tagore's lyrics, apart from their verbal and rhythmic music, are the exquisite delicacy of their sentiment (when it does not degenerate into sentimentality) and the richness and freshness of their natural imagery. Many of Tagore's best lyrics derive their inspiration from the rains, and their most recurrent images are those of Bengal's rivers and the fields and villages by the riverside.

The day is no more, the shadow is upon the earth. It is time that I go to the stream to fill my pitcher.

The evening air is eager with the sad music of the water. Ah, it calls me out into the dusk. In the lonely lane there is no passer-by, the wind is up, the ripples are rampant in the river.

I know not if I shall come back home. I know not whom I shall chance to meet. There at the fording in the little boat the unknown man plays upon his lute.<sup>1</sup>

Tagore enriched Bengali literature in three ways: by exploring the resources of Sanskrit literature, by importing ideas and modes from Europe, and, as in the above poem, by incorporating themes,

<sup>1</sup> *Gitanjali*. The original atmosphere of a village in Bengal is somewhat spoilt in the English version by 'fording' and 'lute'.

images, and symbols from common Bengali life. Colloquial speech predominates in both his poetry and prose, and he used folk-music for many of his songs. It was perhaps his greatest achievement as a writer to have cut a channel in which the three by no means easily reconcilable influences of ancient Indian, modern European, and popular Bengali origin could happily mingle.

'Balākā' is perhaps the best example of Tagore's mature lyricism and his power of abstract thinking in verse. A flock of wild duck cleaving their way through the sky becomes the symbol of the motion that is latent in all motionless things, and of the eternal journey of the human soul from the unknown to the unknown.

Glimmering in the evening glow the curving stream of Jhelum  
pales with the dark like a sheathed scimitar.

On the day's ebb the tides of the night come,  
bringing on their dark waters the drifting star-flowers.

Below the dark mountains  
the deodars stand in rows.

I feel as if creation wishes to speak in its dream,  
but lacks clear utterance;  
and a mass of inarticulate sound is groaning in the dark.  
Suddenly I heard that moment  
in the evening sky

the lightning streak of a sound hurling across the void  
further and further away.

O wild duck,  
your wings drunk with the wine of tempest,  
with wild joyous laugh,  
raised wave upon wave of startled awakening in the sky.

Your wings  
like resonant apsarā women<sup>1</sup>  
broke the meditation of the stillness.

The dark mountain-range shivered,  
the deodar forest shivered.

Your wings  
brought for a moment  
in the heart of the startled stillness  
the passion for speed.

The mountain wished to become a vagrant cloud of vaisākh,<sup>2</sup>  
the tree wished to spread its wings,

<sup>1</sup> Heavenly dancers in Indian mythology who were sent by the gods to disturb the meditation of sages.

<sup>2</sup> A month of the Bengali year when thunder-storms are frequent.

and casting the shackles of the earth,  
to follow that sound, and instantly to lose itself  
searching the boundary of the sky.  
The dreams of the evening scatter, the anguish surges  
for the afar,  
O homeless wings!  
The call rings in the heart of the world:  
'Not here, not here, but somewhere else.'<sup>1</sup>

To divide Tagore's poetry into the religious and the secular would be convenient but arbitrary. For his religion (to quote his own words) is the religion of man, or, better still, the poet's religion. Its essence is the Upanisadic principle of the unity of all life, human and non-human, and the joyous acceptance of everything, happy and unhappy, that life can give.

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In this religion (and here we see the Vaisnava influence) the divine and the human, the universal and the particular, far from being separate, are the counterparts of each other and complete themselves through each other. The divine defines itself in the human, and the human attains divinity through the intensity of living.

What divine drink wouldst thou have, my God, from this overflowing cup of my life?

My poet, is it thy delight to see thy creation through my eyes and to stand at the portals of my ears silently to listen to thine own eternal harmony?

Thy world is weaving words in my mind and thy joy is adding music to them. Thou givest thyself to me in love and then feelest thine own entire sweetness in me.<sup>2</sup>

Man is as necessary to God in this religion as God is to man. 'O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?' 'Day after day you buy your sunrise from my heart.' That is why Tagore knows no ultimate cleavage between the senses and the

<sup>1</sup> Based on Edward Thompson's translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Gitanjali*.



spirit, between body and soul. 'She [the body] is my bride,—she has lighted the lamp in my house.' Further:

My body has become one with my mind and heart. O the wondrous *lilā* in my body!

This radiant sky, this play-house, lit with heavenly candles, of day and night; this strange great earth for ever weaving its magic web on my senses;—

My body is your bridal bed, O my King. Within its small compass is your throne, eternal, infinite, and wondrously beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

Tagore's religion is humanistic in essence, and as far removed from hedonism on the one hand as from barren self-abnegation on the other. 'I desire with all my heart that I may be liberated from suffering by suffering.' 'Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.'<sup>2</sup> Self-centred abnegation is admonished in the following poem:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads. Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with the doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee.

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation. He is bound with us for ever.<sup>3</sup>

As a Hindu, life for Tagore is the *lilā*, or loving play, of God, and renunciation is the freedom of the spirit to participate in the rhythmic flux that is the world.

Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm? To be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this powerful joy?

Keeping step with that restless rapid music seasons come dancing and pass away—colours, tunes and perfumes pour in endless cascades in the abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment.<sup>2</sup>

As the Poet, a character in *Cycle of Spring (Phālgumī)*, says:

In the open world all is change, all is life, all is movement. And he who ever moves and journeys with this life-movement, dancing and playing on his flute as he goes, he is the true renouncer. . . . We poets

<sup>1</sup> 'Deha-lilā.'

<sup>2</sup> *Gitanjali*.

<sup>3</sup> *Gitanjali*. See also the poem beginning 'At midnight the would-be ascetic announced' in *The Gardener*.

call to everyone to carry his joys and sorrows lightly, in a rhythmic measure. Our call is the renouncer's call.

Very few poets, secular or religious, have had Tagore's vision of the beauty and wonder of the created world, his joy in life and nature.

Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light!

Ah, the light dances, my darling, at the centre of my life; the light strikes, my darling, the chords of my love; the sky opens, the wind runs wild, laughter passes over the earth.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, as in the above poem, the sights and sounds of the world find a rapturous expression. At other times they are gathered into the inner stillness of the poet's spirit. As in the following poem, the frozen music of Tagore's Hindu soul:

Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well. O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours.

There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds, through trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.

But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour, and never, never a word.<sup>1</sup>

There never was a poet more of the earth, more earthy, than Tagore. The beauty and splendour of the earth he has proudly and lovingly sung in many a poem. But he also loves the earth, perhaps all the more, for her poverty and imperfection. 'Infinite wealth is not yours, my patient and dusky mother dust. . . . I have seen your tender face and I love your mournful dust, Mother Earth.'<sup>2</sup> In some poems he suggests that his love of the earth is older than his life. Following the Hindu doctrine of the transmigration of the soul he delves into the subconscious recollections of his previous births when, in non-human forms, he lived as a part of nature long before his present body was born. Those dim perceptions beyond memory tell him of the fundamental oneness of all life, human and non-human, and cause him both the joy of union with the earth and the pang of separation from it. 'There is a looker-on who sits behind my eyes. It seems he has seen things in ages and worlds

<sup>1</sup> *Gitanjali*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Gardener*.

beyond memory's shore, and those forgotten sights glisten on the grass and shiver on the leaves.'<sup>1</sup> Further:

How often, great Earth, have I felt my being yearn to flow over you, sharing in the happiness of each green blade that raises its signal banner in answer to the beckoning blue of the sky!

I feel as if I had belonged to you ages before I was born. That is why in the days when the autumn light shimmers on the mellowing ears of rice, I seem to remember a past when my mind was everywhere, and even to hear voices as of playfellows echoing from the remote and dimly veiled past.

When, in the evening, the cattle return to their folds, raising dust from the meadow paths, as the moon rises higher than the smoke ascending from the village huts, I feel sad as for some great separation that happened in the first morning of existence.<sup>2</sup>

Tagore's poems derive their spiritual unity from the love of life and the world that runs through them from beginning to end, giving them the rounded perfection of a song. One of his early poems ('Prān') began:

This world is sweet. I do not want to die.

I wish to dwell in the ever-living life of man.<sup>3</sup>

The same love of the earth, but richer for its spiritual ripeness, is present in the following song which is among the last that he wrote:

I know that at the dim end of some day the sun will bid me its last farewell.

Shepherds will play their pipes beneath the banyan trees, and the cattle will graze on the slope by the river, while my days will pass into the dark.

This is my prayer, that I may know before I leave why the earth called me to her arms.

Why her night's silence spoke to me of stars, and her daylight kissed my thoughts into flower.

Before I go may I linger over my last refrain, completing its music; may the lamp be lit to see your face and the wreath be woven to crown you.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Lover's Gift*.

<sup>3</sup> *My Reminiscences*.

<sup>2</sup> *Fugitive and Other Poems*.

<sup>4</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*.

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